

# The Russian Federation's Policies Toward the Korean Security Crisis: Moscow's Pivot Toward China

*Anthony V. Rinna\**

**Abstract:** Amidst the fluctuation in the state of diplomacy over Korean security between the threat of “fire and fury” in 2017 and the period of summitry between 2018-2019, the Russian Federation has demonstrated an unprecedented level of cooperation with the People’s Republic of China over the North Korean security crisis. Factors that have led to Moscow’s increasing alignment with Beijing, in spite of potential Russian strategic anxieties over the rise of Chinese power in East Asia, include Russia’s own lack of clout on the Korean Peninsula as well as stark differences in Russian and American views over how to achieve the denuclearization of the DPRK and peace in Korea. Trends toward Beijing-Moscow policy coordination presenting an alternative vision to American policies over Korean security means that while Russia’s own role as an independent actor in Korean security continues to remain negligible, it is appropriate to speak of Moscow’s role as comprising an element of a Sino-Russian bloc in Korean security dynamics and diplomacy.

**Keywords:** East Asia, Korea, Russia, nuclear program, foreign policy, security.

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## Introduction

In spite of Moscow’s historic legacy on the Korean Peninsula, the Russian Federation has long been one of the least influential states engaged in multilateral diplomacy over the Korean security crisis. Nevertheless, Russia has maintained a presence in the multi-party dynamics of Korean security, in large part because of its status as a great power, not least as a permanent member of the UN Security Council, and to a lesser extent because of its geographic proximity to the DPRK. In the period between North Korea’s sixth nuclear test and the successful launch of an intercontinental ballistic missile in 2017 and the flagging of summit diplomacy toward the end of 2019, Moscow has become an increasingly intimate associate of China in the diplomatic interplay over North Korean security.

In and of itself, Russia’s leverage over the DPRK remains negligible, especially when compared with China’s influence. The deepening of Beijing-Moscow policy coordination over Korean security, however means that what was previously regarded as primarily China’s leverage over the DPRK, as exemplified by the “China responsibility theory” which remains widespread in US policy circles, will increasingly become Sino-Russian

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\* Anthony V. Rinna is a senior editor with the Sino-NK research organization based in Seoul. He specializes in Russia’s foreign policy toward the Korean Peninsula. E-mail: [tony\\_rinna@yahoo.com](mailto:tony_rinna@yahoo.com).

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in nature. Joint proposals such as the Sino-Russian roadmap of 2017 and the action plan proposed in late 2019 indicate that stakeholders in Korean security such as the ROK and the United States will be forced to coordinate diplomacy with both Beijing and Moscow, meaning that dismissing the latter's role in Korean security dynamics will no longer be as feasible as in the past.

### East Asia in Russia's foreign policy

Geographically speaking, the post-Soviet space remains the priority area for the Russian Federation's foreign policy, as underscored in the Russian government's most recent foreign policy concept.<sup>1</sup> Although the Kremlin has highlighted the importance of the Korean Peninsula in the overall scheme of Russian foreign policy, in reality it occupies a relatively low rung on the overall hierarchy of Moscow's foreign policy priorities,<sup>2</sup> particularly as the Russian Federation lost a significant amount of influence in East Asia - and on the Korean Peninsula in particular - following the Cold War. In recent years however, the Kremlin has been placing more emphasis on its relations with countries across the Asia-Pacific, a development that has come to be known as the "turn to the East." The post-Cold War basis for relating to the Russian Federation, namely Russia's comparatively non-threatening position in East Asia, has partially helped pave the way for the Kremlin's outreach to East Asian states.<sup>3</sup>

The Russian Federation's "turn to the East" resulted in part from the realization of relative post-Cold War stability in Moscow's relations with Europe and the United States as well as the Russian Federation's need to sustain an export-driven economic relationship with the rising East Asian economies.<sup>4</sup> Contrary to common misperception, the "turn to the East" did not fundamentally begin as a response to souring ties with the West from 2014. Rather the roots of Russia's Asiatic pivot began several years prior, although even as contentions with the West may not have specifically prompted Russia to focus on Asia, Russia has nevertheless fallen into an old habit of seeing Asia as an alternative to the West.<sup>5</sup> Specific characteristics of the Kremlin's eastward pivot include implementing legislation and policies aimed at economically integrating the Russian Federation with other states

1 Vladimir V. Putin, "Ukaz Prezidenta Rossiyskoy Federatsii ot 30.11.2016 g. no 640 Ob utverzhdenii Kontseptsii vneshney politiki Rossiyskoy Federatsii [A Decree of the President of the Russian Federation from November 30, 2016. No. 640 On the approval of the Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation]," accessed July 16, 2019, <http://kremlin.ru/acts/bank/41451/page/1>.

2 Motohide Saito, "Russian North Korea Policy: current status and future outlook," in *The Kim Jong Un Regime and the Future Security Environment Surrounding the Korean Peninsula* (Tokyo: The National Institute for Defense Studies, 2016), 163.

3 Elena Litsareva, "Sistema bezopasnosti v Aziatsko-Tikhookeanskom regione na rubezhe vekov i pervoye desyatiletie 21 v. Pozitsiya Rossii [The system of security in the Asia-Pacific at the turn of the century and the first decade of the 21st century: Russia's position]," *Natsional'nyye priority Rossii* 2, no. 12 (2014): 106.

4 Shinji Hyodo, "Russia's security policy towards East Asia," in *Russia and East Asia: Informal and Gradual Integration*, eds. Tsuneo Akaha and Anna Vassilieva, (Routledge, 2014): 46.

5 Jeffrey Mankoff, "Russia's Asia Pivot: Confrontation or Cooperation?" *Asia Policy* 19 (2015): 67.

in East Asia, hosting initiatives such as the Eastern Economic Forum in Vladivostok and even creating an entire ministry aimed at economically developing the Russian Far East.<sup>6</sup>

Today, the issue of nuclear proliferation on the Korean Peninsula constitutes a top priority *within the context* of the East Asia aspect of Russian foreign policy<sup>7</sup>. The Korean Peninsula plays an important role in Putin-era Russian foreign policy toward East Asia, particularly given the Korean Peninsula's position on the Russian periphery. Indeed, despite the post-Soviet space's place on the highest rungs of Moscow's foreign policy priorities, Russia's pursuit of influence on the Korean Peninsula can also be understood not simply as a part of its "turn to the East", but also in light of Russia's bid to re-establish itself as a veritable Eurasian power.<sup>8</sup> Thus, it is natural for the Kremlin to take an interest in issues related to the Korean Peninsula.<sup>9</sup>

### **Moscow's post-Cold War Korea strategy**

Since the mid-1990's Moscow has pursued a policy of balancing its relations between the two Koreas, in part as a way to restore Russian influence on the Korean Peninsula.<sup>10</sup> Part of Moscow's original aim was to position itself as an intermediary between the two Koreas,<sup>11</sup> based on the belief that it could help strengthen Russia's geopolitical position in light of the post-Cold War shift in the balance of power between China and the United States.<sup>12</sup> In 2001, Putin set out a series of goals for Russia's Korea policy, including a peaceful solution to the Korean security crisis and inter-Korean reconciliation (with eventual unification) as well as a formal non-nuclear status for the Korean Peninsula, with an eye on reversing the Yeltsin-era malaise of Russia's policies toward Korea.<sup>13</sup> Under Putin, Russia's interests toward the Korean Peninsula can be said to be three-pronged in nature: *security* interests based on preventing armed conflict and maintaining a balance of military power, *political* interests aimed at ensuring Moscow's position as an intermediary for the two Koreas, and *economic* goals oriented toward enhancing the Korean Peninsula's commercial connectivity with the Russian Federation.<sup>14</sup>

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6 Anthony V. Rinna, "Moscow's 'turn to the East' and challenges to Russia-South Korea economic collaboration under the New Northern Policy," *Journal of Eurasian Studies* 10, no. 2 (2019): 4.

7 Yongchool Ha, and Beomshik Shin, "Non-proliferation and Political Interests: Russia's Policy Dilemmas in the Six-party Talks," *US-Russia: Regional Security Issues and Interests* (Washington, DC: 2006), 178-179.

8 Pavel Cherkashin, "Rossiysko-severokoreyskiye otnosheniya na sovremennom etape i perspektivy ikh razvitiya [Russia-North Korea relations at the current stage and perspectives on their development]," *Izvestiya Vostochnogo instituta* 2, no. 26 (2015): 31.

9 Ingon Yeo et al., "Reosiaui dae hanguk tongil tonggong oegyosiltae [The state of Russian public diplomacy toward Korean unification]" (Korean Institute of National Unification, 2012), 59.

10 Ibid, 60.

11 Ibid, 61.

12 Ha and Shin, "Non-proliferation and Political Interests," 181.

13 Andrey Davydov, "Pekin, Moskva i Vashington: poiski vykhoda iz 'Koreyskogo tupika' [Beijing, Moscow and Washington: the search for an exit from the 'Korean stalemate']," *Kitay v mirovoy i regional'noy politike. Istoriya i sovremennost'* 23 (2018): 145.

14 Yongchool Ha, and Beom-Shik Shin, *Russian nonproliferation policy and the Korean Peninsula*

Indeed, to this day there is some overlap between economics and security in the Russian Federation's Korea policy, seeing as the realization of Russia's security interests vis-à-vis the Korean Peninsula are crucial to the fulfillment of the Kremlin's economic ambitions for the development of the Russian Far East, for which the Korean Peninsula plays a crucial role.<sup>15</sup> The Russian Far East, with its vast natural resources, has the potential to be a nexus of cooperation between Northeast Asian states. The potential benefits to be had from integrating the Russian Far East into the Northeast Asian economic network, however underscores the imperative to ensure stability on the Korean Peninsula.<sup>16</sup> Russia is greatly interested in preventing the outbreak of war on the Korean Peninsula, particularly for economic reasons. Unlike China, which will have to contend with a wave of refugees, the primary blowback of an armed conflict in Korea Russia would suffer would be economic. Not only would war negatively affect the Russian Far East, but large-scale violence in Northeast Asia - one of the main engines of the global economy - would, in turn, affect Russia as a whole, not just in its Pacific regions.<sup>17</sup>

Insofar as the success of the Kremlin's attempt at pursuing balanced relations with the Koreans is concerned, ROK-Russia ties have been somewhat stagnant. Indeed, although Russia and South Korea officially designated their relationship as a "strategic partnership" in 2008, even at that time the two countries had not realized a level of cooperation befitting this type of relationship,<sup>18</sup> a reality that largely holds true today. Nevertheless, although ties between Russia and South Korea have not reached any significant depth correlative to their designated strategic partnership, both sides nevertheless place a certain value on their bilateral relationship. Moscow-Seoul relations have remained unscathed by challenges such as the US's deployment of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system in South Korea, and Russia is a top priority for the ROK's "New Northern Policy", a policy track launched in 2017 aimed at connecting the entire Korean Peninsula to Russia in a way that fosters both economic prosperity as well as security through trade.<sup>19</sup>

DPRK-Russia relations, for their part have witnessed a consistent upward trajectory since Vladimir Putin's visit to Pyongyang in 2000, a development that truly marked the beginning of a positive post-Cold War shift in the Kremlin's relations with the DPRK.<sup>20</sup> In

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(Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania: Army War College Strategic Studies Institute, 2006), 14.

- 15 Tony Rinna, "Sanctions, Security and Regional Development in Russia's Policies Toward North Korea," *Asian International Studies Review* 20, no. 1 (2019): 26-27.
- 16 Tamara Troyakova, "Rol' rossiyskogo Dal'nego Vostoka v razvitií otnosheniy s KNDR [The role of the Russian Far East in developing relations with the DPRK]," *Izvestiya Vostochnogo instituta* 3, no. 31 (2016): 46.
- 17 Artem Lukin, "Uregulirovaniye raketno-yadernogo krizisa na Koreyskom poluostrove: interesy Rossii i perspektivy mnogostoronnegó formata," *Izvestiya Vostochnogo instituta* 2, no. 38 (2018): 33.
- 18 Yeo et al., "Reosiaui anbo-gunsajeollyak byeonhwawa hanbandojeongchaek," 235.
- 19 Rinna, "Moscow's "turn to the East" and challenges to Russia-South Korea economic collaboration under the New Northern Policy," 159-168.
- 20 Nikolay Klovok, "Pozitsiya i rol' Rossii na shestistoronnikh peregovorakh po 'Severo-koreyskoy yadernoy probleme' [Russia's position and role in the Six Party Talks on the 'North Korean nuclear

2000 the two countries also signed a friendship treaty, yet conspicuous by its absence were any Russian security guarantees for Pyongyang, a departure from the North Korea-USSR mutual defense treaty in effect from 1961-1995. In 2001 Kim Jong Il made a reciprocal journey to Moscow, culminating in the 2001 “Moscow Declaration”, in which the two sides agreed to cooperate on issues related to military security and other relevant problems on the Korean Peninsula.<sup>21</sup> North Korea and Russia for their part share a common position in being subjected to Western sanctions, and thus have aligned interests in seeing the West’s reach undermined.<sup>22</sup> The 2015 purging of Hyon Yong-chol, a former North Korean defense minister who had helped facilitate Moscow-Pyongyang ties, caused unease in the Kremlin’s North Korea policy.<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, DPRK-Russia ties have continued to experience an upward trajectory in recent years, as underscored by the frequent high-level visits between North Korean and government officials, including Kim Jong Un and Vladimir Putin in 2019.

### **Russia and North Korean denuclearization**

In the case of nuclear non-proliferation, Russia is unwilling to recognize North Korea as a legitimate nuclear state, even though Moscow doesn’t consider the DPRK’s nuclear capabilities to be aimed at the Russian Federation.<sup>24</sup> One of Moscow’s key short-term interests in Korean security is for the DPRK to return to its former status as an adherent to the NPT.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, as contemporary Russia has faced increasing challenges from preventing the spread of nuclear proliferation among smaller, weaker states on and in relative proximity to the Russian periphery,<sup>26</sup> Moscow is concerned that advances in Pyongyang’s WMD capabilities would lead to counter-measures from other states, thus escalating tensions in a way that jeopardizes Russian interests.<sup>27</sup>

Although the Russian Federation is among the least influential actors in Korean security, Russia would prefer to be involved in multi-party negotiations aimed at resolving the crisis over the DPRK’s weapons of mass destruction.<sup>28</sup> Nevertheless, ever since the outbreak of the first North Korean nuclear crisis in 1994, neither North Korea

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problem’],” *Territoriya novykh vozmozhnostey. Vestnik Vladivostokskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta ekonomiki i servisa* 2, no. 2 (2009): 84.

21 Yeo et al., “Reosiaui dae hanguk tongil tonggong oegyosiltae,” 60.

22 Ibid, 31.

23 Yoko Hirose, “Russia’s North Korea Policy: The Logic and Dilemma of Assisting North Korea.” *The Asan Forum*, last modified December 8, 2017, <http://www.theasanforum.org/russias-north-korea-policy-the-logic-and-dilemma-of-assisting-north-korea/>.

24 Lukin, “Uregulirovaniye raketno-yadernogo krizisa na Koreyskom poluostrove,” 33

25 Klokov. “Pozitsiya i rol’ Rossii na shestistoronnikh peregovorakh po ‘Severo-koreyskoy yadernoy probleme,’” 90.

26 Dmitri Trenin, “Russia and global security norms.” *Washington Quarterly* 27, no. 2 (2004): 64-65.

27 Georgy Toloraya, “The Security Crisis in Korea and its International Context: Sources and Lessons from a Russian Perspective,” *The Korean Journal of Defence Analysis* 23, no. 3 (2011): 346.

28 Yeo Ingon, “Reosiaui anbo-gunsajeollyak byeonhwawa hanbandojeongchaek [Changes to Russia’s security-military strategy and Putin’s policy toward the Korean Peninsula]” (Korean Institute of National Unification, 2001), 120.



nor the US has viewed the Russian Federation as a viable independent actor in light of their respective interests toward the Korean security crisis. In 2003 for example, just after the DPRK's second withdrawal from the NPT, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a proposal that included the following measures: recognizing the DPRK's non-nuclear status; strict adherence to the principles of the NPT; adherence to the 1994 Agreed Framework; implementing multilateral dialogue while simultaneously providing the DPRK with security guarantees, and; the resumption of economic and humanitarian programs on the Korean Peninsula. Neither Pyongyang nor Washington, however demonstrated any interest in implementing Moscow's proposal.<sup>29</sup>

From Pyongyang's point of view, factors such as the Russian Federation's consistent condemnations of North Korean nuclear tests, Moscow's adherence to the principles of nuclear non-proliferation and Russian participation in sanctions laid against Pyongyang by the UN Security Council have undermined North Korea's ability to view Moscow's role in resolving the Korean security crisis in a positive light.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, the lack of a mutual defense treaty - or other legal security assurances from Moscow - means that Russia will have a harder time ensuring the DPRK's security to the point the later may feel comfortable sacrificing its nuclear deterrent. Even a return to the Six Party Talks, in their original form, would be inadequate for such purposes, given that their main goal was to denuclearize the Korean Peninsula, not necessarily ensure security as a whole.<sup>31</sup>

As far as the US's views of Russia's role in North Korean denuclearization are concerned, Russia and the US in principle share the same goals for Korean denuclearization. The Kremlin had initially been keen to cooperate with the Washington in order to achieve North Korean disarmament. In the earliest days of the DPRK's nuclear outbreak, when North Korea withdrew from the NPT in 1993, Russia joined the US in calling for Pyongyang to allow IAEA inspectors into the country.<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, paragraph 18 of "The Russian Federation's National Security Strategy to 2020" (implemented in 2009) outlined Moscow's desire to build a "strategic partnership" with the United States to cooperate on stemming the proliferation of WMD as well as managing regional conflict.<sup>33</sup> Nevertheless, in addition to Washington's disinterest in the aforementioned Russian proposal made during the outbreak of the second North Korean nuclear crisis, the US

29 Klovov, "Pozitsiya i rol' Rossii na shestistoronnikh peregovorakh po 'Severo-koreyskoy yadernoy probleme,'" 86-87.

30 Valeriy Denisov, "Pozitsiya Rossii v voprose o mirnom dogovore po Koreye [Russia's position on the question of a Korean peace agreement]," *Vestnik MGIMO Universiteta* 3, no. 30 (2013): 47.

31 Valeriy Mishin and Vitaliy Boldyrev, "Koreyskiy poluostrov: problemy yadernoy bezopasnosti i ikh vliyaniye na ekonomicheskuyu integratsiyu [The Korean Peninsula: problems of nuclear security and their influence on economic integration]," *Oykumena. Regionovedcheskiye issledovaniya* 2, no. 33 (2015): 125.

32 Shinji Hyodo, "Russia's security policy towards East Asia," 66-76.

33 Vladimir V. Putin, "Strategiya natsional'noy bezopasnosti Rossiyskoy Federatsii do 2020 goda Utverzhdena Ukazom Prezidenta Rossiyskoy Federatsii ot 12 maya 2009 g. no. 537 [National security strategy of the Russian Federation to 2020, approved by decree of the President of the Russian Federation from May 12, 2009, No. 537]," accessed March 21, 2019, <https://base.garant.ru/195521/#friends>.

displayed a somewhat cool reception to the Kremlin's participation in the Six Party Talks, which was ensured at Pyongyang's insistence.<sup>34</sup> From the vantage point of achieving North Korean denuclearization, the United States has relatively little reason to believe that Russian Federation has the ability to execute a positive role in inducing change to North Korea's behavior. Potential cooperation between North Korea and Russia in energy and rail infrastructure have traditionally constituted one of the few levers of economic influence Russia has over the DPRK, although they are not sufficiently strong areas of collaboration to allow Moscow to claim any substantial leverage over the DPRK.<sup>35</sup>

Whereas the United States has traditionally viewed the Russian Federation as lacking substantial levers to apply pressure against the DPRK, officials in Moscow have tended to disagree with their American counterparts over the nature of the threat a nuclear-armed North Korea poses. Within Russia's expert class, many assert that the DPRK's nuclear deterrent is more for psychological purposes, rather than genuine military application.<sup>36</sup> Additionally, Russia does not share the US's concerns over the possibility of North Korea enacting nuclear blackmail or other actions detrimental to national security, as evidenced by Russian intelligence agencies' assessments of the North Korean WMD threat, which tend to be more relaxed than those produced by the US intelligence community. Indeed, countries such as North Korea, as previous Soviet client states, maintain disputes with the United States that emerged in the context of Soviet-US tensions during the Cold War.<sup>37</sup>

As Trenin argues:

“Russia's response to an apparently nuclearizing state is guided less by theological rejection of nuclear proliferation and more by a strategic assessment of how the prospect of a particular state's proliferation might threaten Russian interests per se.”<sup>38</sup>

Based on the extensive history of high-level contacts between North Korean and Soviet/Russian officials and analysts, the commonly-held view among Russia's expert class is that the US's track of applying economic and political pressure on the DPRK government is a miscalculation, and that the US's current method of inducing political change in Pyongyang will backfire - rather than facilitating the collapse of the Kim family regime, pressure will, in the view of many in Russia's foreign policy elite, simply solidify domestic support for Kim and increase the risk of armed conflict.<sup>39</sup>

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34 Ha and Shin, “Russian nonproliferation policy and the Korean Peninsula,” 19-22.

35 Stephen Blank, “Russia's ‘Pivot to Asia’: The Multilateral Dimension,” *National Bureau of Asian Research*, (June 2017): 21-22.

36 Davydov, “Pekin, Moskva i Vashington,” 148.

37 Trenin, “Russia and global security norms,” 65.

38 Ibid, 65.

39 Alexander Vorontsov, “The Russian Perspective on Korean Unification,” *Peace and Unification* 5, no. 1 (2013): 226.

## The Growing Sino-Russian Concert Over North Korean Security

Against the backdrop in the divergent American and Russian views of North Korean denuclearization, the Russian Federation has, in the pursuit of its interests, found a willing collaborator in the People's Republic of China. In the early decades of the standoff over the DPRK's nuclear program, Moscow's views on how to best achieve North Korean denuclearization were not overtly aligned with either Beijing or Washington. At that time, as Ha and Shin argue, China had largely favored the so-called Ukrainian model of denuclearization, while the US appeared more disposed toward the Libyan model. Russia, however was skeptical of both methods.<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, Moscow's views of China's role in the Korean Peninsula have traditionally been overcast by anxieties regarding the rise of Chinese influence in East Asia overall to the detriment of Russian interests. In the Kremlin's strategic views of Northeast Asia, there is also a tacit understanding that Korea is much more important for China than it is for Russia, and thus exists an implicit arrangement that while Beijing and Moscow cooperate on Korean security, Russia will recognize China as having a higher standing in Korea than Russia, while hoping that China will recognize Russia's superior position in places such as Central Asia and Ukraine.<sup>41</sup> This implicit arrangement notwithstanding, Russia would ultimately prefer the establishment of a multilateral system of managing security in Northeast Asia as opposed to exchanging American dominance for Chinese hegemony.<sup>42</sup> For Russia, the idea would be for Moscow to have the role as one of the key stakeholders in a multi-polar Northeast Asian sub-region.<sup>43</sup>

In spite of potential strategic anxieties regarding the rise of Chinese power, the Russian Federation appears to have shifted its own strategy toward Korean security away from attempting to position itself as an independent actor in Korean affairs, encapsulated by Vladimir Putin's aforementioned outline of Moscow's interests on the Korean Peninsula which included positioning Moscow as an inter-Korean intermediary, toward closer alignment with China, culminating in the formation of a Sino-Russian bloc offering an alternative to the American vision of how to achieve lasting security on the Korean Peninsula. Beijing, like Moscow is interested in both the preservation of the political status quo in North Korea for the sake of stability as well as the DPRK's denuclearization.<sup>44</sup> Furthermore, in line with Russian interests, Beijing prefers a strictly diplomatic solution to the standoff over the North Korean nuclear weapons program, preferably done through

40 John S. Park, "Inside Multilateralism: The Six-party Talks," *The Washington Quarterly* 28, no. 4 (2005): 84–85. Cited in Ha and Shin, "Non-proliferation and Political Interests," 176.

41 Artem Lukin, "Uregulirovaniye raketno-yadernogo krizisa na Koreyskom poluostrove," 34.

42 Ibid, 35.

43 Lukin, "Rossiya i severokoreyskiy yadernyy krizis. (2017): 65.

44 Hongseo Park, "Pukhanŭi ch'a haeksirhŏm ihu chunggugŭi taeŭng - 'wangi inisyŏt'ibŭ'ŭi paegyŏnggwa hamŭi [China's Response to North Korea's Fourth Nuclear Test: Implications of the Wang Yi Initiative]" *Chunggukhak yŏn'gu che chip [Research in Chinese Studies]*, no. 77 (2016): 253.



a multilateral format<sup>45</sup>. Beijing does not view denuclearization as a standalone issue, but rather considers denuclearization as well as the implementation of a peace agreement between North and South Korea to be interconnected and mutually-reinforcing goals,<sup>46</sup> a goal that is not incompatible with the Russian Federation's interest in creating a Northeast Asian sub-regional multilateral security format.

Providing a firm basis for China-Russia cooperation over Korean security is the broader Sino-Russian strategic partnership. Sino-Russian relations have evolved with considerable speed to the level of strategic partnership over the past two decades, particularly in response to American hegemony in Northeast Asia. Beijing and Moscow's shared desire to balance against the US has prompted the PRC and Russia to emphasize issues of mutual concern as vehicles of cooperation while avoiding potential areas of contention.<sup>47</sup> In spite of perceptions that China has been a more responsible actor than the adventurist Russian Federation – raising questions as to what benefits a rising PRC would garner from cooperating with an aggressive yet declining Russia – Beijing and Moscow have recently shown a track record of cooperation on various hard security issues, particularly at the UN Security Council.<sup>48</sup>

Particularly from 2017, the North Korean security has proven to be an area of cooperation between China and Russia. Both China and Russia share a common opposition to the US-led campaign of “maximum pressure”, despite both Beijing and Moscow having consistently voted in favor of sanctions against Pyongyang. China and Russia's shared skepticism over the efficacy of sanctions has emerged in part because the US-led sanctions regime against the DPRK has had a negative effect not only on North Korea itself, but possibly also on the Chinese and Russian regions geographically proximate to the Korean Peninsula,<sup>49</sup> providing an impetus for Beijing and Moscow to jointly present an alternative to the US approach. One exemplar of Beijing-Moscow coordination over Korean security is the so-called “roadmap” to Korean peace unveiled in 2017. The Sino-Russian “roadmap” breaks down into three stages: first is the agreement whereby the DPRK halts its missile provocations in exchange for the US ceasing large-scale military exercises. The second is fostering direct dialogue between the DPRK and the US. The third

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45 Jong-ho Shin, “Si Jinp'ing sigi chunggugüi taeye jöllyak pyönhwawa hanbando chöngch'aege taehan yönghyang” [Changes to China's foreign policy strategy in the Xi Jinping era and its effects on policy toward the Korean Peninsula] *T'ongil jöngch'aek yön'gu chekwön ho* [Unification Policy Research] 25, no. 2 (2016): 147.

46 Park, “China's Response to North Korea's Fourth Nuclear Test,” 258.

47 Alexander Korolev, “Systemic balancing and regional hedging: China–Russia relations,” *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 9, no. 4 (2016): 386.

48 Michael Cox, “Not just ‘convenient’ China and Russia's new strategic partnership in the age of geopolitics,” *Asian Journal of Comparative Politics* 1, no. 4 (2016): 317-334.

49 Cin Dun, “Rossiysko-kitayskoye voyenno-politicheskoye sotrudnichestvo v Severo-Vostochnoy Azii kak sostavlyayushchaya strategicheskogo partnërstva [Russo-Chinese political-military cooperation in Northeast Asia as a component of strategic partnership],” *Vestnik Zabaykal'skogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta* [Baikal State University Herald] 25, no. 6 (2019): 95.

is initiating multilateral dialogue to establish a security mechanism in Northeast Asia.<sup>50</sup> The DPRK's moratorium on long-range and nuclear missile testing as combined with reductions in joint ROK-US military exercises as well as the repeated summits between the North Korean and US top leadership indicated that the Sino-Russian roadmap was to all intents and purposes being fulfilled.

Toward the end of 2019, following nearly two years of summit diplomacy between Kim Jong Un and various heads of state, Russia's foreign minister Sergei Lavrov announced that Beijing and Moscow would continue to engage in diplomacy over Korean security in a multilateral format.<sup>51</sup> Around that time, the Russian government unveiled a joint Sino-Russia action plan to North Korea's First Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs Choe Son Hui during an official visit to Moscow for strategic dialogue with the Russian government. Although the details of the action plan were not made public, according to Sergei Lavrov, the action plan would focus on defense, economics, humanitarian and political affairs.<sup>52</sup> Shortly after the Kremlin unveiled the Beijing-Moscow action plan to the North Korean government, China and Russia jointly proposed a program for sanctions relief at the United Nations Security Council, which the United States immediately rejected.<sup>53</sup>

### **Policy implications of Sino-Russian cooperation over North Korean denuclearization**

Considering the development of Sino-Russian ties over Korean security, it appears that Beijing and Moscow will continue to form a more-or-less coherent block in favor of an approach toward North Korean security that contrasts with the US's maximum pressure campaign. Korean security remains an important facet of the Russian Federation's East Asia policy, although in and of itself, Moscow has not gained any notable degree of influence in Korean affairs. Yet due to Moscow's increasing alignment with China, the United States will likely be forced to consider the implications of the Russian Federation's interests on the Korean Peninsula to a greater extent than in the past. Given the breakdown of direct North Korea-US dialogue in late 2019, in the coming years the United States may attempt to engage in increased multilateral diplomacy with China and Russia. In this case, Washington will find itself dealing with two separate states that comprise what is to all intents and purposes a unified bloc that poses a vision for Korean security in

50 Anastasiya Fedorova, "Rol' problemy KNDR dlya regiona Vostochnoy Azii i eye vliyaniye na Rossiyskuyu Federatsiyu [The role of the DPRK problem for the East Asian region and its influence on the Russian Federation]" (Honors thesis, *Zarubezhnoye regionovedeniye*, 2018), 61.

51 Anthony Rinna, "At Moscow conference, slim progress on North Korea's 'window of opportunity,'" *NK News*, November 10, 2019, <https://www.nknews.org/2019/11/at-moscow-conference-slim-progress-on-north-koreas-window-of-opportunity/>.

52 Anthony Rinna, "Choe Son Hui in Moscow: Russia tries to resuscitate flagging DPRK-U.S. diplomacy," *NK News*, November 24, 2019, <https://www.nknews.org/2019/11/choe-son-hui-in-moscow-russia-tries-to-resuscitate-flagging-dprk-u-s-diplomacy/>.

53 Edith Lederer, "US opposes lifting key sanctions against North Korea," *AP*, December 18, 2019, <https://apnews.com/8692b877d6c22548622056e263f25ec7>.

fundamental opposition to the US's gambit. Unlike in the past, when North Korea and its nuclear program factored into Sino-Soviet geopolitical competition,<sup>54</sup> there are no signs of immediate geopolitical contention between Beijing and Moscow over the Korean Peninsula, despite the fact that in the long term the Russian Federation's strategic interests may be best served by the unification of Korea so as to remove the need for Sino-Russian cooperation in this particular area.<sup>55</sup>

Russia's *de facto* role as the junior partner in the Sino-Russian strategic partnership as a whole, and in the Korean theater in particular, may tempt outside actors to continue to simply dismiss Moscow's role in Korean security outright, viewing Russia as little more than an appendage of China. This, however would be short-sighted. Aside from the increasing overlap of Chinese and Russian policy interests, North Korea and the Russian Federation have experienced their own bilateral rapprochement, particularly since 2019. Following the summit between Kim Jong Un and Vladimir Putin in April of that year, Sergei Lavrov described Choe Son Hui's visit to Moscow in late 2019 for North Korea-Russia strategic dialogue as marking a "golden age" in DPRK-Russia ties. Thus, the other stakeholders of Korean security, namely Japan, South Korea and the US, will find themselves having to deal with a Russian Federation whose policy interests are largely in lockstep with China, while maintaining its own deepening bilateral relations with Pyongyang.

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54 Balázs Szalontai and Sergey Radchenko, "North Korea's Efforts to Acquire Nuclear Technology and Nuclear Weapons: Evidence from Russian and Hungarian Archives," working paper no. 53 (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2006), 29.

55 Davydov, "Pekin, Moskva i Vashington," 151.

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