

## **Russian Policy on the North Korean Nuclear Crisis**

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As an occupying power after World War II, a close ally of neighboring North Korea for 45 years, and now a country enjoying good relations with both North and South, Russia has significant economic, political, and strategic interests on the Korean Peninsula. Moreover, there are thousands of North Korean workers in the Russian Far East, Russo-North Korean trade relations are improving, and there are ambitious projects to establish economic links with South Korea using North Korean territory to transship natural gas southward and to connect Asia with Europe through the Trans-Siberian railroad. Russia is therefore highly concerned about the recent turn of events on the Korean Peninsula and what it perceives as the U.S. escalation of tensions over North Korea's nuclear and missile programs. As one retired Russian general warns: "A frightened cat becomes a tiger." [1] Like many states, Russia sees the solution to the current crisis in a negotiated settlement, believing that threats, sanctions, and accusations are counter-productive. At the same time, President Vladimir Putin is firmly opposed to acceptance of North Korea as a nuclear weapon state, a circumstance that would greatly complicate Russia's security interests in Northeast Asia.

### **The History of Soviet/Russian Ties with North Korea**

For over four decades, the Soviet Union had an essentially "frozen" policy on the Korean Peninsula—firmly backing Pyongyang. But in the past 15 years, beginning with Mikhail Gorbachev's dramatic foreign policy reforms in the late 1980s, Moscow's policy

toward the Korean Peninsula has undergone major changes. After initially boosting military aid to Pyongyang, Gorbachev reduced defense, industrial, food, and energy support to zero by the end of his term. At the same time, Moscow carried out a surprising rapprochement with former Soviet enemy South Korea. Gorbachev was rewarded with almost \$1.5 billion in credits from Seoul to help his declining economy.

After the Soviet break-up in December 1991, Russia's first post-communist president, Boris Yeltsin, continued a pro-South Korean line, strictly circumscribing Russian ties with Pyongyang. Moscow allowed its security agreement with Pyongyang to lapse, deleting all mention of Russian military aid in an eventually renewed treaty, even in case of a direct attack on the North. Similarly, trade with North Korea dropped from \$3.5 billion in 1988 to below \$100 million by the mid-1990s. Trade with South Korea, by contrast, surged to \$3.2 billion in 1995. Yet, the relationship was not all roses. Russia's economic ties with Seoul eventually reached a plateau, as South Korean companies began to recognize the difficulties of working in Russia's chaotic economy. Debt issues also began to plague the relationship, with Moscow proving unable to repay the South Korean credits granted under Gorbachev. By the late 1990s, therefore, Moscow began to reassess its pro-South policy and a number of academics—along with communists in the Duma—began to call for a more “balanced” policy on the Korean Peninsula. Key issues included: recognition that the initial benefits of the pro-South Korean policy had been oversold, a feeling that Russian interests were neglected in the U.S.-DPRK Agreed Framework, frustration resulting from Russia's exclusion from the Four-Party Talks (seen as a factor of the demise of Russian influence over Pyongyang), and negative

domestic fallout from an embarrassing spy scandal involving South Korean agents active in Russia.

Under President Putin, who made a highly visible trip to Pyongyang in 2000 and hosted two return visits by Kim Jong-Il in 2001 and 2002, relations with North Korea have received a considerable elevation in importance. Nevertheless, the new relationship with Kim is based not on Russian largesse, as in the past, but a new policy of “pragmatism” on the part of Moscow. Putin recognizes that key Russian political and economic objectives in the Far East—reducing tensions, re-establishing Russia’s presence in Asia, and fostering development of the Russian Far East—cannot be achieved without some sort of re-engagement with the North. However, ambitious Russian hopes in early 2003 of “brokering” a deal to break the deadlock in the current crisis have not been achieved, despite Moscow’s attempts at shuttle diplomacy by sending its deputy foreign minister to Pyongyang for six hours of talks (over four days) with Kim Jong-Il in mid-January. One problem is the fact that bilateral trade, while recovering, still remains at only \$115 million per year, thus limiting Moscow’s leverage over its erstwhile ally.[2]

### **Current Russian-DPRK Relations and Considerations for U.S. Policy**

The current North Korean nuclear crisis is testing the durability not only of Russia’s new policy toward Pyongyang, but also Russia’s relationship with the United States. Although Presidents Putin and Bush have seemed to see eye-to-eye on an increasing number of issues since 9/11, leading to a significant warming in relations, conflicts over the conduct of the war in Iraq, Washington’s irritation with alleged Russian weapons transfers to Baghdad, and disputes over the postwar role of U.N. weapons inspectors have begun to reintroduce tensions into the relationship. While the prospect of

worsening relations clearly worries Moscow much more than it does Washington, Russia has its limits. As one Russian expert notes, Moscow stood firm in the run-up to the Iraqi conflict, when many assumed that President Putin would back down under pressure from the United States.[3] Still, Russia is likely to try to split the difference between the two sides and maintain reasonable relations with both its neighbor (North Korea) and its strategic partner (the United States). Russian policy would likely lean toward the United States if North Korea moves forward with reprocessing and nuclear weapons development. On the other hand, a strong U.S. push for sanctions backed by the threat of a pre-emptive U.S. attack on North Korea (in case of further nuclear developments in Yongbyon) could push Russia closer not only to North Korea and China, but also possibly to South Korea, to the ultimate detriment of U.S. interests.

Although the Russian Foreign Ministry has in recent months supported the principle of initial bilateral talks between Pyongyang and Washington, Moscow also wants to become involved directly in any broader Korean Peninsula settlement. As Deputy Foreign Ministry Alexander Losyukov commented recently on the necessary follow-on work after the trilateral Beijing meeting: “At further stages, it will be beneficial and logical if other countries...join in. A multisided discussion is necessary.”[4] Thus, one commonality that Moscow and Washington currently share (although for different reasons) is their call for eventual *multilateral* talks to resolve the crisis. Russian support for such an approach dates back as early as March 1994, when Moscow called for a “multilateral conference” to bring about a comprehensive settlement to Korean Peninsula issues in the face of the apparent failure of bilateral U.S.-North Korean efforts at that time to end the then-ongoing crisis of 1993-94. Russia opposed the “back channel” deal

that led to the U.S.-brokered Agreed Framework, which Moscow saw not only as a U.S. tactic to exclude it from the Korean Peninsula but also a “stab in the back” by Pyongyang, after Moscow was forced for financial reasons to cancel plans dating from the mid-1980s to build light-water reactors for North Korea (leaving Moscow holding a large debt—repudiated by Pyongyang—for work already completed on the project). Later, Moscow did not fail to notice the snub implicit in the Four-Party Talks (involving the United States, DPRK, China, and South Korea) during the mid-1990s, which excluded Moscow (and, in its view, notably failed).

Today, the Bush administration’s apparent aim in pursuing an international approach is to rally pressure from multiple capitals to force North Korea to end its nuclear weapons program, even to the point of “breaking” the regime with punitive sanctions. Moscow believes it deserves a seat at the table, not only because of its role as a border state, but also as a country that has full diplomatic relations with both sides (which the United States, South Korea, and Japan lack) and one that sits on the U.N. Security Council. Moscow has not hesitated to enunciate its views on the issues, which have not often coincided with those of the United States. Moscow favors negotiations and a gradual reduction in tensions, leading eventually to U.S.-DPRK diplomatic normalization, security guarantees to both North and South by outside and neighboring powers, a broad package of economic aid (though not provided by Russia), and the reintroduction of U.N. inspectors.[5] A key guideline behind Russia’s approach—similar to that of China and South Korea—is to prevent hundreds of thousands (or possibly millions) of starving North Korean refugees from flooding into its territory in the case of a sudden collapse of the DPRK government or the initiation of military hostilities. As a

senior Russian official noted recently, “We have to think of preventive measures to defend our interests and...to defend our populations in territories contiguous to Korea in case of a serious conflict in that region.”[6] Unlike China, however, newly democratic Russia has no political motives that would cause it to support continuation of Kim Jong-II’s communist regime.

Russia has proposed its own variant of a settlement (in cooperation with some supporters in South Korea), which would involve using Russian natural gas—subsidized by the South—as a carrot for weaning Pyongyang off its dangerous nuclear addiction. Since the Iraqi conflict, however, Washington has dropped mention of Russia in references to “key states” (South Korea and Japan) that need to be added to the current trilateral talks, suggesting that the Bush administration’s previous commitment to include Moscow in settling the Korean crisis may now be in doubt.

Given these factors, the overlap of U.S. and Russian positions on the crisis may be fleeting. Washington may decide to close ranks with its “real” allies and “punish” Moscow for its failure to side with the United States on Iraq. Russia may heed the calls of analysts in its press warning of a “North Korean Chernobyl” in case of U.S. action against Yongbyon and try to build a coalition of states (including China, South Korea, and Japan) against possible war on the Korean Peninsula.[7] While Russia is not in a position to block U.S. military action, Washington cannot ignore Moscow’s perspective with impunity. Russia may not be critical to the success of initial talks with the North, but a failure to engage Moscow later on could create serious difficulties for the United States as it seeks to bring about a broader settlement on Korean Peninsula, including coming up with an economic and security framework for alleviating Pyongyang’s current

concerns. Such structures are likely to be a prerequisite for North Korea's willingness to destroy its nuclear weapons program and engage in future missile restraint. By contrast, a badly worsened U.S.-Russian relationship and aggressive U.S. policies on the Peninsula could lead Moscow to revert to old policies of limited military assistance and running U.N. interference for Pyongyang, particularly if Moscow is excluded from future multilateral talks. Such a dynamic would greatly compound current U.S. difficulties in dealing with the current crisis.

These factors suggest the sagacity of involving Moscow in ongoing efforts to alleviate the North Korean nuclear crisis. Russia is eager to play a positive role in any future settlement, particularly if it is engaged on the ground floor. A more measured and consultative U.S. policy (even in the presence of bilateral differences) is likely to bring Russia along. In this manner, the United States could use Moscow's considerable knowledge of North Korea politics, economics, and security matters to its own benefit, while helping to convince Pyongyang that it does not have soft landing waiting for it in the arms of Russia.

**Notes:**

[1] Gen. (ret.) Alexander Zarubin, "The Korean Peninsula: From Inter-Korean Confrontation to a System of Cooperative Security," in Moltz and Mansourov (eds.), *The North Korean Nuclear Program: Security, Strategy, and New Perspectives from Russia* (New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 215.

[2] Pyotr Goncharov and Alexander Smotrov, “Russian Expert: Moscow Has No Instruments to Influence North Korean Leader,” RIA Novosti (Moscow), April 3, 2003.

[3] Comment by Russian expert on Korea Alexander Mansourov, April 22, 2003, phone interview with author.

[4] Russian Dep. For. Minister Alexander Losyukov quoted in “Moscow Hopes China, North Korea, U.S. Relieve Nuclear Arms Concerns,” Interfax (Moscow), April 19, 2003.

[5] For a range of Russian views on the Korean Peninsula crisis, see Cristina Chuen, “Russian Responses to the North Korean,” website of the Center for Nonproliferation Studies, Monterey Institute of International Studies at:  
Crisis<http://cns.miis.edu/research/korea/rusdprk.htm>.

[6] Russian Dep. For. Minister Alexander Losyukov quoted in “Deputy FM: Russia planning for Korean Peninsula ‘worst-case scenarios’,” Agentstvo Voyennykh Novostey (Military New Agency)(Moscow), April 11, 2003.

[7] Aleksey Bogaturov, “Voyna v Irake okonchatelno spustila kurok yadernogo rasprostaneniya” (War in Iraq finally releases the trigger on nuclear proliferation) *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* (Moscow), April 15, 2003.