

## RUSSIA'S "NEW ENGAGEMENT" WITH NORTH KOREA AND FUTURE OF NORTH EAST ASIA

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For decades, North Korea and the USSR claimed to be close allies and “fraternal socialist countries” united by their allegiance to the Communist ideals – or at least, this was what their official press usually said. Trade with the USSR constituted between a quarter and a half of North Korea’s total trade volume (26.1% in 1980, 56.8% in 1989)(1). For many decades, the Soviet Union was the largest trading partner of the North, the major or only provider of important strategic materials and technology. It was also North Korea’s donor and benefactor: over the period of 1948-1984 the North accepted an estimated US\$2.2 billion in Soviet aid and credits (2), and the seemingly normal trade was also often aid in disguise since the prices were subsidized by the Soviet side.

These days, all these things are in the past. Trade with Russia does not play a major role in North Korean economic exchanges any more. In 2003, for example, trade with Russia constituted merely 4.9% of DPRK total trade (the major partner was China, with a share of 42.8%). This made Russia North Korea’s fifth largest trading partner, well below Thailand (10.6%) and only slightly above the Netherlands (4.2%)(3). What is probably more important, the trade volume has remained essentially unchanged over the last decade.

There have been a few highly publicized cases of Russian aid being delivered to the North (like a shipload of foodstuff which arrived in 2004), but for all practical purposes Russian aid has been insignificant, almost non-existent, after the collapse of the Soviet

Union. In spite of occasional rumours, there is almost no Russian investment to speak of: the Russian capital perceives North Korea as a risky and unattractive environment, and the government agencies do not encourage investments there.

One should normally expect that such a dramatic decline in trade and aid would lead to a complete freeze of the diplomatic exchanges and to a general loss of mutual interest. But the actual picture is very different. If one has a look at the North Korean press, the image of the post-Soviet Russia is remarkably good. The Russian press, largely independent from the government nowadays, presents a different picture, but articles representing the North as victims of the American and South Korean manipulations do not raise eyebrows any more. The state-controlled TV airs the documentaries and shows which put the North at least on equal footing with the South and explains why Pyongyang has no choice but to behave like it does.

Probably, it is the sudden upsurge of the top-level diplomatic activity which is most striking. Over decades of much-trumpeted “friendship,” not a single Soviet leader ever visited North Korea. Kim Il Sung’s trips to Russia after the Korean War also remained infrequent, with almost three decades between his trip in 1959 and his next trip in 1984. Nowadays, over the past few years we have witnessed a chain of Moscow-Pyongyang summits: in 2000 Vladimir Putin became the first Soviet/Russian leader who visited Pyongyang. Kim Jong Il went to Russia twice, in 2001 and in 2002. The exchange of political niceties reached the heights which have been unthinkable in the Soviet era, culminating in Kim Jong Il’s proposal to establish a Russian Orthodox church in Pyongyang (nothing has been heard about the North Korean Orthodox believers since the late 1940s).

Such a honeymoon appears quite strange since it takes place against a backdrop of dramatic decline, even actual freeze of the economic interaction between the two

countries. It is not what should be expected. What are the reasons behind such Russian and North Korean policies? What do they hope to achieve by demonstrating this newfound mutual sympathy?

To understand the changes of Russia's North Korean policy, one has to remember that for many decades all official rhetoric of "friendship" and "solidarity" hardly reflected the real perception of the North by both Moscow public and Moscow leaders. By the early 1990s, the image of North Korea among the Russian public and elite alike was quite negative.

Such images began to develop after Stalin's death and Khrushchev's reforms, when the Soviet people began to discuss political and social questions – not in the press, of course, but in the privacy of one's kitchens and bedrooms. The Soviet intellectuals of the 1960s and later decades looked at North Korea with great unease. For them, Pyongyang embodied everything that was wrong about the Communist system. In short, it appeared a caricature of the then USSR. Unlike the West where many intellectuals toyed with Maoism and similar versions of the extreme Left, virtually nobody in the Soviet intellectual circles of the 1960s or 1970s felt positive towards either Mao or Kim. The memories of Stalin's terror and its horrors were still too fresh to make the East Asian Stalinists appear attractive.

Of course, the Soviet intellectual world of the 1960s and 1970s did not consist of liberal-minded intellectuals alone. There were also hard-liners and nationalists, hawkish admirers of the strong state. In this group, however, North Korea also did not enjoy much popularity. The hard-liners were probably quite happy about Kim's Stalinist policies, but they did not like his intense nationalism and his anti-Russian tendencies. For those 'neo-imperialists' Kim Il Sung was, first and foremost, an unreliable ally.

The officialdom, including a majority of diplomats and Leonid Brezhnev himself, was not fond of Pyongyang either: they disapproved of its brutal and inefficient Stalinism and they also saw it as an unreliable, costly and scheming ally.

In spite of the spectacular lack of trust (mutual, one must admit), the USSR still maintained superficially good relations with North Korea, largely with three major objectives in mind.

First of all, North Korea was seen as a bulwark against the US military and political presence in East Asia. In the case of a confrontation with the US, the North Korean army would distract a number of US troops, and thus Soviet strategists wanted to keep it in good fighting order. The North Korean economy was also to be supported – otherwise, the country would be unable to maintain an efficient army.

The second imperative was related to the ongoing Sino-Soviet feud. Moscow provided Pyongyang with aid since the DPRK always hinted that without such aid it would probably join the Chinese side. The rift between the USSR and China gave North Korea enormous leverage over both Communist giants.

Thirdly, in spite of all ideological differences, North Korea was seen as a fellow socialist nation, eligible for at least a minimum of support because of its professed allegiance to the Communist doctrine. The stability and relative prosperity of such a country would be useful for the eventual worldwide victory of the Communism - even though in the 1960s, not to mention the 1980s, few people in the Kremlin seriously worried about the future of the World Revolution.

Thus, the government-controlled Soviet press avoided direct criticism of the North and even occasionally published dry official articles extolling the “unbreakable” and

“eternal” Soviet-Korean friendship. Diplomats exchanged proper smiles and handshakes before the camera crews. However, from around 1970, more daring Soviet journalists began to hint at such sensitive topics as Kim’s personality cult or lingering militarism. The hints had to be subtle, but when a Soviet TV audience of the late 1970s saw how the North Korean kindergarten kids enthusiastically performed the dance called *My heavy machine gun*, the bizarreness of the situation was for everybody to see. No doubt, such effect was intended by the producers of that documentary.

The official “wall of silence” collapsed around 1988, but this did not result in much surprise or shock. People knew already. Press basically re-ran the stories which had circulated as rumours since long before.

The first few years of the post-Soviet history are now seen by the Russian public as a time of unnecessary concessions to the West. In the early 1990s, the post-Soviet Russians were eager to join the Western community which was described as the “civilized world” (few people actually realized that this term came straight from the colonial era jargon and was definitely anachronistic by the 1990s). They hoped that Russia would be accepted to the international community as another great power, and were ready to agree to what later came to be perceived as unilateral concessions. The few surviving Communist regimes did not attract much attention and were seen as a major embarrassment for a “new democratic Russia”. North Korea was perceived as a partner both doomed and embarrassing. Its immediate collapse, perhaps as a result of a Rumanian-style revolution, was widely expected in 1990-1993.

As a sign of new times, in 1992 Russia rescinded Article 1 of the 1961 treaty between the USSR and the DPRK. The article stipulated that each side would get involved in a military conflict fought by the other side, and provide it with all necessary assistance. The article had always made Soviet policy-makers nervous, since it might lead to Soviet

involvement in a new Korean War. Nonetheless, until the late 1980s it was seen as a price to pay for keeping the alliance with the North. In the new situation, the alliance had to be broken, and the article was rescinded. It is symbolically important that the decision was made public by the then Russian foreign minister Andrei Kozyrev, whose name later came to symbolize the deeply unpopular policy of the alleged unilateral concessions to the West. The 1961 treaty was not extended in 1996: most people still expected the North to collapse in near future.

Kim Il Sung died a peaceful death in 1994, and the expected violent collapse of his regime never happened, but this non-event even produced some good literature in Russia. Lev Vershinin, a historian and a good writer, authored *Posledniaia partiia (Endgame)*, a short novel which described the violent collapse of an imaginary Communist dictatorship (4). The country in the novel had features which reminded readers of Romania, Cuba and North Korea all at the same time. Even geographic names were deliberately mixed – against all laws of linguistic history, so the capital of this imaginary country had a Korean-sounding name of T'aedongan and the place of the Stalinists' last stand was called Munch'on in the novel. Around the same time, Igor Irteniev, arguably the most popular Russian satirical poet of the 1990s, mockingly wrote of an event which everybody expected to take place soon: "I still cannot sleep without a sedative / in the darkness of the night / when I imagine what happens to Kim Il Sung / in the blood-stained hands of the executioners".

However, in the mid-1990s the Russian policy towards the North changed dramatically. This reflected the general change of mood in Russia. A large and increasing part of its population began to see the US-led West not as a friendly force, but as a crafty rival, preying on Russia's weakness. The general disappointment about the results of the Western-style reform continued to mount. The pro-Western enthusiasm of the early 1990s waned and was replaced with deep suspicions – not only in the government

offices but also in popular psyche. Thus, geopolitical opponents of the West, the assorted “pariah states” began to attract some sympathy in Russia, and the unabashed national egoism came to be seen as the only rational strategy.

It was this situation which resulted in the turnaround of Russian policy towards North Korea. By 1996-1998 it became clear that – contrary to earlier expectations – Pyongyang would not collapse any time soon, so the restoration of working relations with the North was a necessity, especially against the backdrop of Russia’s efforts to develop a more independent political line. In Russian academic circles (to be more precise, in those parts of the academic circles which are closely connected with foreign policy establishment) the critique of North Korea was hushed up and augmented with critique of the alleged Western insensibilities in dealing with this very peculiar society.

This combination of somewhat capricious disappointment with the developed West and pragmatic considerations made the Russian government reconsider its strategy toward the Korean peninsula. In this regard one has to cite Alexander Vorontsov, the head of the Korean section in the Institute of Oriental Studies, the major government think tank. Dr. Voronstov is one of the most outspoken and well-informed representatives of the Russian academic-cum-diplomatic establishment. He wrote in 2002:

“At those times [in the early 1990s], Moscow did not feel sorry about its break with the DPRK, since it hoped to compensate the losses through the intensive development of the economic relations with South Korea, whose large investments were expected: first, as reward for the diplomatic recognition [...] and then for the downscaling of economic and military cooperation with the DPRK. However, these hopes were in vain. Diplomatic relations with Seoul were established, cooperation with Pyongyang was halted, but the South Korean businesses were not impressed by this. Furthermore, it became clear that Russia, which had lost its influence over the

DPRK, is not of particular interest to South Korean government.”(5)

It's worth noting that human rights' considerations do not play a major role in Russian foreign policy. A period of idealistic enthusiasm about democratic values in the early 1990s proved to be short-lived, so few people in Russia take seriously statements about human rights. Neither the Russian government nor Russian public shows much enthusiasm for crusades in the name of human rights in distant lands – and indeed a surprisingly large part of Russians see the 'human rights' concept as hardly anything more than a clever American ploy aimed at justifying military interventions and imposing pro-American regimes all across the world. Even those Russians who do not support such an opinion still do not care much about the domestic situation in North Korea. It is well known that North Korea is notorious for its disregard to human rights, but Russians cannot care less. Their position is simple: first, it is North Korea's internal affair; second, if North Koreans themselves live under such a regime, who are we to pass judgments on their behalf? After the post-perestroika shock and disappointment, the Russian public's position is clear: politics should be about interests, not ideals.

And what are Russian national interests in the Korean Peninsula? In a nutshell, it is maintenance of the status-quo. The political chaos on the Korean peninsula will lead to difficulties in its trade and investment and will bring strategic and social problems to the Far East region, where Russia will not be able to exercise enough influence. The general weakening of Russian power and its partial disengagement from East Asia make its positions in this part of the world more vulnerable. The steady decline of the population in the Russian Far East also contributes toward the perception of the area as a weak spot: over the 1992-2004 period, the population of the Russian Far East shrank some 18%.

Collapse of the Kim Jong Il regime or a new war in Korea is undesirable for Russia:



such events would create a mass exodus of refugees, economic difficulties, and a break up of the established foreign trade networks. The unified Korea might harbour American or Chinese influence which is also not welcomed in Moscow. Finally, unified Korea might become very nationalistic, prone to territorial claims over its neighbors – another less than ideal side effect of unification. In the current situation Russia will be unable to explore opportunities created by such a dramatic turn of events, and also will be unable to deal efficiently with the associated threats. Therefore Russia prefers to support the North Korea regime and hope that its evolution will be peaceful and gradual.

In this regard, I would attract attention to a few articles written by a Russian diplomat and scholar who uses the penname Georgy Bulychev. The most important and recent of these articles was published in Japan Focus under the title ‘A Long-term Strategy for North Korea’(6). This article describes a scenario which is seen as most desirable for Russia: the gradual transformation of North Korea, more or less similar to that of China, under the control of the Kims’ family and their entourage. Georgy Bulychev believes that:

How might such a positive scenario look (constructed somewhat imaginatively)? <...> It would include modification of the economic system based on creating North Korean chaebol (conglomerates) – first based on state property and step-by-step privatization led by their managers, who will be members of the North Korean elite. This would ensure their support for political stability and the introduction of market principles into commodity flows, and for the emergence of a financial system and ownership relationships based on liberalized government control. Later, small and medium businesses (starting from agriculture) could spring up. <...> Deregulation of the economy will increase popular economic activity, bringing about foreign investment and an increase in international cooperation. Labor-intensive export-oriented production could mean the start of a

"Taedong River Miracle."

This is indeed the ideal outcome from the Russian point of view: no revolution, no war, no undue increase of the American or Chinese influence but a prolonged co-existence of two Korean states. While I have expressed my doubts about the plausibility of such a scenario, I must admit that such expectations/hopes are widely shared in South Korea as well, even if the motivation is different. In essence, this is a short description of 'Sunshine Policy'.

In general, this Russian vision of the ideal outcome is closer to the basic assumptions of Seoul's 'Sunshine Policy' than that of any other state. Even if the present author harbors much skepticism about the viability of such a 'reformed' North Korean state, these expectations might to some extent unite Seoul and Moscow in their dealing with the North.

It seems that the nuclear issue does not play a major role in Russian policy toward Korea even if lip service is customarily paid to the declarations about de-nuclearization of the peninsula. Of course, a non-nuclear North Korean state is an ideal outcome, since a nuclear arms race in a potentially unstable region near Russian borders is not welcome. Nevertheless, the nuclear issue is not seen as a major threat. It is not very likely that Russian territory will ever be targeted by North Korean missiles, and Northeast Asia in general is not vital to Russia's overseas strategy. Russia, in spite of dealing with a large-scale domestic terrorist threat, appears not to be particularly afraid of the possible leaks of nuclear technology to the terrorist groups and, at the very least, do not see North Korea as a likely source of such leaks.

It is also worth remembering that Russia's resources are quite limited now, so it has to be very economical and cannot afford to spend much on active policy in the areas where

its interests are not vital. The current foreign policy of Moscow is focused on Europe, the U.S. and the newly independent countries of the former USSR, while its foreign policy toward Northeast Asia has been necessarily passive and reactive.

Thus, the general political line is that of moderate support for Kim Jong Il's North Korea. However, take a closer look and it becomes clear that most of the exchanges between Moscow and Pyongyang are of a purely symbolic nature. These are largely about 'symbolic actions' rather than about any material exchange and support.

As a typical example of such symbolic exchanges, one should mention the attempt to establish an Orthodox church in Pyongyang. Such an initiative was reportedly proposed by Kim Jong Il during his train trip across Russia in 2000. Obviously, he was aware that the new Russian regime perceived the church as its important ideological ally, and perhaps even overestimated the significance of such alliance. Whatever the reasons, Kim Jong Il proposed to establish a Russian orthodox church in Pyongyang and even assured the Russian diplomats that the North Korean authorities would "find the believers." As a result of this exchange, two young Russian priests were sent to Pyongyang to study and four North Koreans came to Moscow to take classes in Orthodox religious thought (7). The Holy Trinity church is being built and is expected to open in near future (8).

Among other gestures of a similar vein, one can mention the recent decision to decorate Kim Jong Il with a Russian medal to commemorate the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Soviet/Russian victory at the Second World War (9).

Still, it is remarkable that China, Japan, the U.S., and South Korea are the countries which provide massive aid to North Korea, but there is nothing on a comparable scale happening between Moscow and Pyongyang in spite of lofty declarations of friendship.

As I have mentioned above, in 2003 the trade with Russia constituted meager 4.9% of the entire North Korean trade volume.

There are two main reasons for Russia to hold such a passive position. First, as it has been mentioned above, Moscow does not attach particular importance to the Korean peninsula and is not willing to spend its scarce resources in the area. But it is also important that Moscow has learned from its own experiences of the past decades that it will not receive anything in return for the assistance it gives to North Korea. In this regard Russia, with its long experience, probably indeed have a better understanding of the North Korean inner politics than other countries now involved with Pyongyang.

The active symbolic exchanges between the two countries help both Russian and Korean governments in their political maneuvering. From the late 1990s, Russia insists that it has special relationship with North Korea and that it still exercises influence on Pyongyang. However, it is difficult to believe that such special relationships actually exist. Even the former Soviet Union, as one of the superpowers, did not enjoy much sway over North Korea, but now Russia, being a second-rate power that offers no money to Pyongyang will hardly have any significant influence at all. The supposed 'Moscow influence' exists as long as Pyongyang wants to play the same game. However, such statements make it possible for Russia to present itself as an active mediator and "honest broker" who supposedly has some ear in Pyongyang.

Such schemes seem to work with Pyongyang as well. It is important for North Korean diplomacy to have a counterweight to the excessive pressure from China, South Korea and US. The alleged "special understanding" with Russia provides the North Korean diplomats, highly adept in manipulating the great powers, with additional welcome leverage.

Over the last 15 years, the relations between North Korea and Russia underwent two dramatic transformations. First, in the early 1990s they went from an uneasy but established alliance to thinly veiled mutual hostility. Then, in the late 1990s, the old alliance was re-defined on new foundations and with remarkably less willingness to commit resources to its support. Most of the activities have consisted of the intense exchange of diplomatic niceties and “cheap” symbolic gestures, without much real material or financial contributions or essential concessions from either side.

It seems that Moscow sees its relationships with North Korea as ‘diplomatic merchandise’ of a kind. Moscow wants to win concessions from the U.S. by asserting that the Russians can guide Pyongyang along the ‘right’ way. To a large extent, it is necessary to prevent the further deterioration of the crisis around North Korea.

- 1) Adrian Buzo. *The Guerrilla Dynasty*. Westview: 1999. P.122.
- 2) Marcus Noland. *Avoiding the Apocalypse: The Future of the Two Koreas*. Washington: Institute for International Economics. P.97
- 3) According to the statistics by the KOTRA: 2003 . : KOTRA, 2004. P.11.
- 4) The novel has been published a number of times. See for example: Lev Vershinin. *Dvoe u podnozhii vecnosti*. Moscow: Argus, 1996.
- 5) Alexander Vorontsov, Alexander Ivanov. *Mezh dvuh Korei [Between two Koreas]*. *Kommersant-vlast*, 29 February 2000
- 6) Can be accessed on line at: <http://japanfocus.org/222.html>
- 7) *Ezhnednnye novosti*, 16 March 2003.
- 8) *Sedmitsa*, 12 December 2003.
- 9) *Daily NK*, 5 May 2005.

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