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**CURRENT RUSSIA – NORTH KOREA RELATIONS:
CHALLENGES AND ACHIEVEMENTS**

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Policy toward North Korea is an important component of Russia's general strategy toward the Asia-Pacific region, which is now regarded by Moscow as a crucially important area. This growing emphasis on Asia is evidenced by President Vladimir Putin's increased participation in APEC summits including the November 2005 meeting in Pusan, South Korea, and Russia's development of a dialogue partnership with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). During the first Russia-ASEAN summit, held in Malaysia just before the East Asian Summit in December 2005, President Putin gave a speech to the participants of the nascent East Asian Community (EAC), a new multidimensional integration association in the region.¹

A calculating and pragmatic approach toward the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK, or North Korea) and the Korean Peninsula in general has become an integral part of Russia's strategic course. In just the last five years, Russia-North Korea relations have reached an unprecedented level. Moscow has gained unique and exclusive communications capabilities with Pyongyang based on the development of trust between the two states' leaderships at the highest political levels, described in North Korean terminology as the "two states' leaders' personal friendship."

The improved Russia-North Korean relationship has generated mixed reactions. Some observers dismiss it and assert that Russia has no real influence over North Korea, while others criticize Moscow for having overly intimate relations with Pyongyang. To understand the true state of present bilateral relations, it is first necessary to understand the fundamental characteristics of the Russia-North Korea relationship.

Above all, it should be stressed that Moscow's policies toward the Korean peninsula are determined by Russia's serious and legitimate strategic interests in Korea. The fundamental goal of the preservation of peace and stability on the Korean peninsula defines Russia's policy toward Korea, and by extension its position on any settlement of the North Korean nuclear crisis. Russia stands firmly behind a peaceful resolution of the crisis, achieved through diplomacy and negotiation.

The use of military force to resolve the North Korea crisis is totally unacceptable to Russia for several reasons. First, the security of Russia's Far Eastern regions would be inevitably be affected by an armed confrontation in Korea. Large concentrations of American military forces (likely similar to the number of troops involved in the 2003 invasion of Iraq) on the borders of Russia and China would certainly cause elevated tensions. Combat operations would likely be fierce and sustained, further increasing risks of a wider conflict. As a result, three of the world's nuclear-armed powers (the U.S., the PRC, and the Russian Federation, not to mention North Korea itself) might place their forces on high alert. American munitions were found across the borders of a number of Iraq's neighbors during the 2003 invasion. In such a situation, an accident could lead to catastrophic consequences. Given the complexities of combat and the region's geography, the potential for spiraling tensions is high.

Second, taking into consideration the fact that both of the conflict's potential belligerents (the U.S. and the DPRK) have nuclear weapons, it is unfortunately possible to envision a nuclear exchange. The massive radioactive clouds generated by such an incident could easily reach

¹ "The Eastern Vector of Russian Foreign Policy," December 28, 2005, www.mid.ru (Website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation).

Russian terrain. In addition, the flow of refugees into Russia fleeing such a conflict would create the possibility for an ecological and humanitarian disaster. A military conflict could also increase the possibility of an outflow of Russian citizens from its Far Eastern region to the west, which may dramatically affect the country's demographic situation.

Third, Russia has sunk considerable amounts of capital in to numerous large-scale, long-term international infrastructure projects involving the Korean peninsula, such as oil and gas pipelines and Trans-Korean and Trans-Siberian railroads junctions. These projects are of crucial importance to the economic revitalization of the Russian Far East. Needless to say, in the case of a new Korean War, these projects—and Russian economic interests—would be severely damaged.

Finally, Russia strives to avoid the use of force in Korea because a military conflict over the peninsula would, in all likelihood, gravely complicate Moscow's relations with Washington and Tokyo.

For these reasons, the perspective of the Russian Federation (as well as those of China, the ROK, and partly Japan) on the North Korea nuclear issue does not fully coincide with the United States's. While Moscow adamantly and unconditionally stands behind the achievement of a denuclearized Korean peninsula and the irreversible dismantlement of North Korea's nuclear weapons and nuclear development programs, it also firmly supports the peaceful resolution of the present crisis.

Based on access to unique information, a long history of interaction, and many contacts within North Korea, Russia has concluded that the widespread belief in Kim Jong Il's impending collapse, particularly prevalent among certain circles in the West, is a miscalculation, and that in the short- to mid-term regime change in Pyongyang may only be achieved by a major foreign military intervention. Therefore, observers in Moscow are confident that pressure and blanket economic sanctions intended to bring about regime change will not result in North Korean political transformation or the erosion of domestic support for Kim, but rather will only increase tensions and the probability of a military confrontation.

Additionally, an incongruity of interests exists regarding the strategic vision of the final destiny of the Korean peninsula. For instance, American representatives repeatedly stress that a united Korea should remain a U.S. ally. Russia supports a unified Korea that will maintain friendly relations with all countries, including Russia, and opposes foreign interference in the unification process. It is not difficult to understand why Russia (or China, for that matter) would not be happy at the prospect of American troops on its borders, an inevitable outcome of unification through military force.

Furthermore, it is reasonable to expect that any attempt to use non-peaceful means to solve the issues on the Korean peninsula would provoke a sharp response from China. In the event of Korean unification, China's influence upon Pyongyang and Seoul would likely diminish. For its part, a united Korea would have to dramatically re-consider its military and strategic priorities, and would possibly choose to make its stance appear more rigid, setting off a region-wide wave of strategic re-evaluation and militarization. Therefore, attempts to involve both Russia and the PRC in a scenario of military intervention would not appear to have great odds for success.

As noted above, Moscow's policy in Northeast Asia in general, and toward the Korean peninsula in particular, has been determined by Russia's long-term national interests, the first and foremost of which is the preservation of peace and stability on the Korean peninsula. The baseline of Russia's modern Korean policy is the perception of both the Republic of Korea and Democratic People's Republic of Korea as independent states and close neighbors, which should be treated discretely and independently.

Recently, the international political situation on the Korean peninsula has been strongly affected by the "second North Korean nuclear crisis," and the increasingly confrontational character of American-North Korean relations. This confrontation between Washington and Pyongyang has reached a dangerous pitch since October 2002, and the negative consequences of a potential armed conflict are self-evident. Given this high-tension situation, it is urgent that a diplomatic "way out" of the present nuclear crisis be found. Moscow supports the creation of a bilateral framework for direct U.S.-DPRK or multilateral talks on the issue.

Bilateral relations between the new democratic Russia and North Korea in the 1990s

Historical overview

Russia has a long history of interaction with the Korean peninsula. Russia and both Koreas celebrated two prominent dates in 2004: the 140th anniversary of the beginning of Korean resettlement in Russia; and the 120th anniversary of the establishment of bilateral relations between the Russian empire and Korea under the Chosun dynasty. Despite the celebrations, Russia's relationship with the peninsula has been defined largely by turmoil.

It is instructive to recount some of the major historical milestones in the relationship: the catastrophic Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905) caused by rival imperialist ambitions, particularly in Korea; the flight of Korean refugees in the Far East and their tragic relocation forced by Stalin in 1937; the break-up of Korea and the post-World War II clashes leading to the Korean War; the standoff between the DPRK and the ROK during the Cold War; and Pyongyang's adventurous behavior resulting in heated conflicts that more than once placed the peninsula on the brink of a large-scale conflict with the potential involvement of the U.S. or USSR (such as the 1968 "USS Pueblo" crisis).

Due to geography and politics, Russia developed ties with the Korean liberation movement against the Japanese colonial regime in Korea. The Russian Maritime Province (Primorye) became a base for Korean refugees and anti-Japanese guerilla fighters beginning in the 1910s. In fact, a guerilla unit led by Kim Il Sung found sanctuary in Primorye after being defeated by the Japanese regular army in 1940. Later on, Kim Il Sung remained with a special Soviet Army unit located in the Khabarovsk area until 1945. During that period, he received military and administrative education and the rank of captain in the Soviet Army. An important fact is that his son—the present "Dear Leader" Kim Jong Il—was born in 1942 in the village of Viatskoe located in the Khabarovsk area and initially received the Russian name "Yura."

These circumstances, among others (including the fact that Stalin personally selected Kim Il Sung as a possible future leader of Korea) predetermined the special ties between the USSR and North Korean leadership.

During Cold War crises, therefore, the DPRK could count on Moscow's support, regardless of the condition of official relations. For instance, although China's role during the Korean War (1950-1953) is well-recognized, little is publicly known about the support the DPRK received from the Russian military, which was officially a non-participant. Soviet pilots contributed to the air defense of North Korea, including the defense of the strategically vital Yalu River bridges. The pilots were from elite Soviet air units, many having served in World War II. However, there were far fewer Russian pilots and crews than those in the armada of American air forces. In addition to their numerical disadvantage, Soviet pilots were in a tactically unfavorable position. They were based in territory neighboring the Chinese border, were ordered not to cross the 38th parallel under any circumstances, and to carry out operations only above territory held by North Korean and Chinese forces (in order to prevent capture). These self-imposed limits, combined with fuel shortages, drastically decreased the potential tactical impact of Soviet forces. Nevertheless, these pilots shot down 1,300 American aircraft in combat over North Korea, including about 200 U.S. B-29 "Flying Fortress" bombers. Russian losses consisted of 135 pilots and more than 300 airplanes.²

After the Korean War, the USSR emerged as the main trading partner and sponsor of North Korea. Ninety three North Korean factories were built with Russian technical assistance, forging the country's heavy-industrial backbone. Moreover, hundreds of thousands of North Koreans were educated in the USSR. Nevertheless, in the late Gorbachev period, the Soviet Union's traditional role as the primary trading partner to the DPRK began to erode. This was due in part to Premier Gorbachev's controversial decision in the late 1980s to convert trade with all socialist countries, including the DPRK, to a hard currency basis. This poorly prepared and miscalculated decision painfully affected everyone involved, including the USSR and turned out to be one of the first steps toward the North Korean economic crisis of the mid-1990s.

The Yeltsin administration

Throughout the administration of President Boris Yeltsin, North Korea was seen in official Moscow circles almost as a "persona non grata." During this period, Russia was seeking legitimacy and membership in the various clubs of the major democratic powers. Moscow's strategic orientation became decidedly "Atlantic." (This period recently has been labeled "democratic romanticism," or, in the words of penultimate USSR Minister of Foreign Affairs Aleksandr Bessmertnykh, as the period of "ultimate naïveté.") During this time, Moscow's policies were reminiscent of the proverb "to be more Catholic than the Pope." Russian policy toward the Korean peninsula was similarly one-sided and featured unilateral rapprochement with the Republic of Korea and maximum estrangement from the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.

Russian foreign policy during this period officially focused on the country's "inevitable removal from the DPRK,"³ and Russia's relations with North Korea were effectively frozen. The new liberal elite decided that maintaining ties with a "totalitarian regime" did not meet Russia's democratic ideals. For example, Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev stressed in 1996 that Russia was ready to sell armaments to all comers, excluding North Korea.⁴

² Vestnik PVO (Air Defense Bulletin), No. 2, (Moscow, 1990) p. 83.

³ "The Concept of Russian Federation Foreign Policy," *Diplomaticheskii vestnik* (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation), special issue, January 1993, p. 16.

⁴ *Defense Nationale*, October 1996. In: ITAR-TASS Kompas, No. 45, November 7, 1996, p. 22.

At the same time, a new system of international relations was beginning to take shape around the Korean peninsula. The United States, Japan and South Korea gained opportunities to increase pressure on the DPRK with an eye to ending North Korean sovereignty and achieving unification on terms favorable to the South.

Russia's primary objective was to prevent the advent of nuclear weapons on the Korean peninsula, a position that aligned with Western interests. However, Western powers did not allow room for any specific Russian interests. Unsurprisingly, these developments alarmed China, which did not desire a unified Korea that would be dependent on the United States and home to U.S. military bases on its borders. It's not an exaggeration to say that the prospect of American troops stationed along the Yalu River constitute a nightmare for Beijing.

Following the bilateral settlement of the 1993-1994 nuclear crisis by the United States and the DPRK, Washington's role in Korean affairs increased dramatically. China's importance also grew when it acted as virtually the lone "defender" of Pyongyang, rejecting any activities on the peninsula that did not take into account China's interests. Owing to the creation of the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO), a consortium tasked with the construction of a nuclear power station in DPRK, coordination of Korea policy between the United States, South Korea and Japan was re-adjusted, and Tokyo was also able to more actively promote its interests in the settlement of the Korean issue. Russia was now effectively limited to the position of an observer.⁵

Naturally, other players in the "Korean game" viewed Moscow's position as an indication of its weakness, which prompted them to totally disregard Russia's interests. The "2+2" negotiating mechanism created in 1996 (the DPRK and South Korea, the United States and China) left Russia without a role to play in the settlement; Moscow's suggestion of adopting a "2+4" formula was turned down. South Korea began to view its relations with Russia mainly through the prism of exerting pressure on Pyongyang.

The Russian "discovery" of a dynamically developing country—South Korea—gave rise to big hopes. South Korea succeeded in instilling in the minds of Russia's new leaders the notion that isolation of the DPRK was a necessary attribute (if not the precondition) of improving relations with South Korea. For example, Seoul emphatically urged Moscow to cut cooperation with Pyongyang, promising unlimited increases in trade and investment. Accordingly, Moscow ended its bilateral ties and communications with the "Great Leader" of the North, almost totally destroying its formerly privileged position. However, Russia was surprised to hear later from the same South Korean representatives that Russia's lack of leverage over North Korea had caused Seoul's interest in cooperation with Moscow to decrease correspondingly. The Russian elite's "democratic romanticism," which sometimes fostered unwarranted trustfulness and a lack of maturity, contributed to this weakening of Russia's position in Korean affairs.

⁵ Toloraya G., "Korean Peninsula and Russia," *Mezhdunarodnaya Zhizn* (International Affairs), No. 12, (Moscow, 2002) pp. 63-72.

Latent efforts to correct negative trends in the late Yeltsin period

The unfavorable condition of Russia's relationships and strategy toward both Korean states did not satisfy the pragmatic wing of the Russian government, and resulted in efforts to change Russia's policy approach.

The first signal of this shift was President Yeltsin's congratulatory birthday message to Kim Jong Il in February 1996. (Notably, Yeltsin had delegated the duty of sending condolences to Pyongyang after the death of Kim Il-sung in 1994 to the Prime Minister of the Russian Federation.) Then, the first meeting of the Intergovernmental Commission for Trade, Economic, and Scientific-Technical Cooperation between Russia and DPRK was held in the spring of 1996. Furthermore, visits of high-level Russian leaders to North Korea, such as the Russian Federation Vice-President Vitali Ignatenko and the Speaker of the State Duma Gennadii Seleznev, were important events in the rehabilitation of Russia-DPRK bilateral relations, and aided in halting their further deterioration.

Russian diplomats began to realize that Moscow's relationship with Pyongyang had to be improved in order to achieve a balanced position on the Korean peninsula. In the fall of 1996, the Ministers of Foreign Affairs from both countries signed a plan covering diplomatic exchange and an agreement on cultural and scientific cooperation for 1997-1998. This agreement became the basis for the conclusion of numerous interdepartmental agreements in the following years.

The Russian Federation Ministry of Foreign Affairs also began making active efforts elsewhere in the region to neutralize any adverse effects on Russian security arising from changes in the balance of forces on the Korean peninsula. For instance, in October 1996 Foreign Minister Yevgeniy Primakov offered an initiative for enhanced Russian-Japanese cooperation on Korea at a ceremony dedicated to the 40th anniversary of the re-establishment of diplomatic relations between Russia and Japan. Primakov argued that the two countries shared an interest in not being "forced out" of the diplomatic process on the Korean peninsula, and that strengthened Russian-Japanese cooperation could enhance political stability both in Korea and in the Asia-Pacific region as a whole.⁶

Russian diplomats continued to develop the idea of a broad international forum on Korea with participation of both Korean states, all permanent members of the United Nations Security Council, Japan, and some specialized United Nations organizations such as the International Atomic Energy Agency. According to a statement by then-Vice-Minister of Foreign Affairs Grigory Karasin, a formula for the resolution of issues on the Korean peninsula needed to recognize the realities on the ground in Korea. After some hesitation, Moscow took the position of "positive neutrality" toward the idea of four-party talks, declaring that any steps toward the reduction of tensions on the Korean peninsula were welcomed.

During a visit to the Republic of Korea in July 1997, Foreign Minister Primakov underlined that "as the contours of the talks format are now showing themselves as 'two plus two,' both Koreas plus People's Republic of China and the U.S., we have no reasons to resist and will be assisting them. Along with this we believe it to be useful to broaden the limits of such talks up to

⁶ Diplomatic Courier (Dipcourier), No. 15(41), (Moscow, October 1996) p.14.

calling an international conference.... Moscow aspires not only to be associated with this process, but it can even enter the club of regulating participants, which are not directly involved in the conflict.”⁷

While in Seoul, Primakov decisively explained to President Kim Young Sam why Russia “can positively influence the situation on the Korean peninsula, based on two factors: first of all, relationships with both Korean states, which other countries involved in the process of inter-Korean regulation lack; and secondly, the ‘high degree of development’ which the relationships between Russia and the U.S., China, and Japan have reached and with which we could coordinate our line in relation to regulating the Korean problem with the three largest international players.”

In January 1997 Vice-Minister of Foreign Affairs Grigory Karasin added momentum to the shift, stating that the Russian Ambassador to North Korea, Valery Denisov “is apt to eliminate the obstacles in the way to development of the Russia–DPRK relationship” and is sure that “Russia is ultimately interested in peace and stability at its Far East borders and is going to maintain relationships with both Korean states in such a way as to keep relationships with one side from harming relationships with the other.”⁸ Vice-Minister Karasin confirmed during a stopover in Beijing on his way to Pyongyang that “Moscow is going to play a more active role in issues of the Korean peninsula.” Many journalists have argued that one of Karasin’s tasks was to prepare for the visit to North Korea by “not only the Minister of Foreign Affairs Primakov,” but also to prepare for meetings at a higher level.⁹

This line of thinking—striving for balance in relations with Pyongyang and Seoul—has been mostly followed since the mid-1990s. In the late 1990s, painstaking work was undertaken to prepare a new bilateral treaty to replace the 1961 Russia-DPRK treaty of friendship, cooperation, and mutual assistance, which Moscow had decided not to extend in 1996. The North Koreans came to the bargaining table with numerous initiatives of their own. Needless to say, it was not easy to overcome strong negative feelings and mistrust on the North Korean side. Nevertheless, as a result of patient diplomacy, Pyongyang withdrew many of its initial requests, such as Russia’s support of Korean unification in the form of a confederation. Pyongyang agreed to include a reference to the UN Charter—one it had rejected since its fight against UN-sanctioned forces during the Korean War. Though North Korea remembers the “non-friendly in the past” actions of Russia, “which has brought insult into the flesh of the Korean people,” negotiators were already speaking about such events in the past tense, as if to acknowledge that a new stage of the relationship had already begun.

The visit of Russian Federation Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov to the DPRK in February 2000, and the signing of the Treaty on Friendship, Good-Neighborly Relations and Cooperation, finally brought about the normalization of bilateral relations between Russia and the DPRK. Both sides noted similar views on diverse international problems: common concerns in regards to NATO expansion to the East; American development of a global anti-missile defense capability and theater missile defense in Northeast Asia.; and Pyongyang’s support for the actions of Russian Federation forces in anti-terrorist operations in Chechnya. South Korean diplomats assert that in the course of Ivanov’s February visit, he managed to convince his North Korean counterparts of

⁷ Dippcourier, No. 14, (Moscow, August 1997).

⁸ Dippcourier, No. 16, (Moscow, October 1996).

⁹ Izvestiya, January 23, 1997.

the attractiveness of DPRK participation in the ASEAN regional forum and to urge them to make a decision regarding membership.

Continuing debates over Moscow's stance toward North Korea

Discussions within Russia's political establishment over foreign policy are ongoing. A number of different perspectives are voiced, including support for maximal contact with the U.S. and unconditional participation in an international anti-terrorist coalition headed by America. Correspondingly, calls for Russia to unambiguously join Washington's campaign of pressing Pyongyang started to sound more and more loudly.

Some prominent scholars, such as Vasily Mikheev, argued that after 9/11 Russia was caught in a "trap of two logics." Moscow found itself bound by both its special relationship with Pyongyang and the obligations of an anti-terrorist coalition. Mikheev's appeal was to follow Washington totally and unconditionally.¹⁰ However, the Kremlin decided not to repeat Russia's diplomatic mistakes of the first half of the 1990s, and demonstrated the will to continue with an independent line toward the Korean peninsula.

The current state of bilateral relations

Turning point in bilateral relations

Even though Moscow's displeasure with the DPRK's domestic policies and many aspects of its foreign policies was warranted, Russia's self-imposed alienation from Pyongyang and loss of influence over North Korea harmed the prospects for improvement in bilateral relations. Moscow's leverage in the region also suffered. As a result, during the second half of the 1990s, Russian political elites began preparing new approaches to Korea.

Vladimir Putin's elevation to Prime Minister in August 1999 and then President in December had critical significance for Pyongyang, which attributed its previous grievances to Boris Yeltsin. Kim Jong Il's references to Vladimir Putin were to the effect that at last Russia had a leader "with whom to do business." However, intensive diplomatic hard work had to precede a historical breakthrough in Russia–DPRK relations. These efforts began to bear fruit in late 1998, and by March 1999, it became possible to agree completely on the text and initial new Treaty on Friendship, Good-Neighborly Relations and Cooperation. It was signed in February of 2000, after Yeltsin left the political arena.

Starting in April 2000, covert preparations for a visit by President Putin to Pyongyang began. The first summit meeting in the history of Russian-Korean relations took place in July 2000 when a Joint Declaration was signed, the first international document signed by Kim Jong Il as leader of the DPRK.¹¹

Political relations

¹⁰ V. Mikheev, *Far Eastern Affairs*, Vol. 3 (Moscow, 2002) p.34-45 [in Russian].

¹¹ *Diplomaticheskii vestnik* (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation), 2000, p.8.

President Putin's arrival in the Kremlin marked a real turning-point in relations between Moscow and Pyongyang. His policy toward the DPRK may be regarded as an antipode to the previous Yeltsin administration approach: bilateral political relations underwent a facelift, and special relations based on "personal friendship," in Korean terminology, developed between the leaders of the Russian Federation and Democratic People's Republic of Korea. Optimism is so high that current Russia-DPRK relations have been described as exceeding even the best times of "the Soviet-Korean friendship based on socialistic internationalism." It's interesting that the notion of "personal friendship" is regarded by North Korean officials not simply as a slogan but as a practical principle as well. The author remembers with a hidden smile his own experiences of serving at the Russian Embassy in Pyongyang at the start of the new millennium, during which time one of his responsibilities was the observation of bilateral relations.

During his first visit to Russia in August 2001, "Dear Leader" Kim Jong Il was deeply impressed by the Mariinsky Theater Ballet in St. Petersburg and decided to develop a ballet program in the DPRK. Soon after the visit, North Korean officials asked Russia to accept five students at the Mariinsky Theater's famous Vaganova Ballet Academy just as the former Soviet Union had done.

Shortly before this request, the Russian Ministry of Education had granted the DPRK 30 scholarships at various institutions, explicitly stipulating that artistic disciplines were not included. Nevertheless, the Russian embassy sent Pyongyang's request to Moscow and as expected, the Ministry of Education confirmed that it was absolutely impossible given that the Vaganova Ballet Academy already had a long line of foreign applicants who had been waiting for years and who were willing to pay. Embassy staff in Pyongyang patiently tried to explain this to their North Korean counterparts, but the latter insisted that their case was not an ordinary one reiterating that the two countries' relations were characterized by "the epoch of the leaders' personal friendship" and all bilateral questions should be resolved in the framework of this spirit.

To this author's surprise, Pyongyang's persistence resulted in Moscow granting two positions for visiting North Korean students at the Vaganova Ballet Academy. There are many reasons explaining this surprising turn of events, but foremost among them is the broad shift in foreign policy by President Putin from the overly ideological approach of his predecessor to a course of common sense and pragmatism in international politics, which, besides everything else, is based on a simple axiom—"with neighbors we should live in peace and, if possible, in friendship."

The leader of the North Korean people appreciated the brave step of the Russian president, who had been the first head of a leading Western democracy to visit the capital of the "pariah-country" in July 2000. Kim Jong Il did not forget Putin's efforts and reciprocated the gesture in July 2003, by insisting to the U.S. that Moscow be included in the Six-Party Talks.

Kim Jong Il has warm personal relations with two other key figures in the upper echelons of Russian's Korea policymaking management: the Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary Representative of the Russian Federation President in Far-East Federal District, Konstantin Pulikovsky, and the Ambassador of the Russian Federation to the Democratic People's Republic of Korea Andrei Karlov. These high level officials accompanied Kim Jong Il on his train during his first 24-day trip across the Russian Federation in 2001. Pulikovsky later became a frequent personal guest of Kim Jong Il in Pyongyang. Ambassador Karlov, who was acknowledged by Kim

Jong Il in the memorable train-trip before the official presentation of credentials, is now honored with a few personal meetings each month with the DPRK's head of state. Often such meetings take the form of long, informal conversations.

One of the latest symbolic gestures from Pyongyang toward Moscow has been a renaissance of Orthodox Church activity in North Korea. In June 2006, in eastern Pyongyang near the centrally located modern avenue, Tongil (Unification) Road, a ceremony was held to celebrate the founding of Holy Trinity, the first orthodox church in the DPRK, with space for 500 congregants. Construction of the church is planned to be completed by the end of 2006. In the beginning of 2005, a wedding ceremony for a North Korean clergyman was conducted at this church by the Hong Kong-based Russian Orthodox Church priest Father Dionisy.¹² These examples illustrate Russia's unique role in present-day life of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.

China's "vital" role in nuclear crisis diplomacy and the importance of visits to North Korea by representatives from the People's Republic of China have been widely celebrated by Western media sources. It is commonly perceived by international media outlets that China is the only state able to persuade Pyongyang to participate in the multilateral talks. Of course, there are grounds for such an assertion. However, this perception is also a result of Washington's multi-sided strategy, which is aimed at drawing Beijing to its side and away from Pyongyang, while simultaneously attempting to push the Russian Federation out of Korean affairs. Western media sources often ignore the fact that the strength and intensity of high-level Russian-North Korean dialogue is unmatched by any other country's influence in Pyongyang. However, Russia's importance is often downplayed or misunderstood. For example, one Japanese scholar noted that "the beginning of the North Korean nuclear crisis in October 2002...relegated Moscow to a marginalized position on the Korean issue" and that a "retrenchment stage" in bilateral relations had begun.¹³

To understand the groundlessness of such an assertion, it is necessary to review the high-level political contacts between Moscow and Pyongyang. The events of 2002 provide a telling example of the strength of these contacts. In 2002, a number of Russian policymakers visited North Korea, including President Putin's Far East Federal District Representative Pulikovskiy (in February and in April), Russian Federation Minister of Foreign Affairs Ivanov (in July), head of the Far-East Military District General Yuri Yakubov, St. Petersburg Governor Vladimir Yakovlev (in April), Moscow Mayor Yuri Luzhkov (in December), and Russian Federation Minister of Railways Gennadi Fadeev (in October-November). During the same period, the following North Korean officials visited Russia: Chairman of the Supreme People's Assembly Choe Thae Bok visited Moscow in March; Deputy Chairman of the Ministers Cabinet Cho Chang Dok visited the Far-East in April; after a 15-year break, the Minister of Foreign Affairs Paek Nam Sun visited Moscow and the Far-East in May; and the Chairman of Pyongyang People's Committee Ryang Man Kil visited Moscow in January 2002¹⁴ and in February 2003.

¹² *Seylsky Vestnik*, (Seoul, February 2, 2005) [in Russian].

¹³ Yoshinori Takeda, "Putin's foreign policy toward North Korea", *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific Advance Access*, (doi:10.1093/irap/lci141), March 3, 2006, pp. 1, 12.

¹⁴ A. Vorontsov, "Russia and the Korean Peninsula: Contemporary Realities and Prospects" *Far Eastern Affairs*, No. 3, (Moscow: Institute of Far Eastern Studies, 2002) p. 44-59,

Also in 2002, cooperation between different offices and organizations of the two countries, including military affairs, was being reconstructed and redeveloped. In October, a delegation from the DPRK's Ministry of People's Military, headed by the Deputy Head of the General Headquarters of the Ministry of People's Military Lee Men Su, visited the Russian Federation. At the beginning of November a delegation from the Air Forces of the Korean People's Army, headed by General-in-Chief of the Air Forces Oh Kum Chul, visited Russia. In April, a delegation from the DPRK's Main Department for Atomic Energy, headed by its Chief Lee Choi Saeng, visited Moscow, as well as a delegation from the Academy of Sciences, headed by its Vice-President Kang Dong Kyun, who afterwards visited Novosibirsk.

Undoubtedly, the visit by DPRK's Chairman of the State Defense Committee Kim Jong Il to the Russian Far-East in August 2002 marked an unprecedented event in Russia-DPRK bilateral relations. It was Kim's third meeting in two years with President Putin.

To reiterate, the above meetings all took place over only one year. Hopes for improved Russia-DPRK relations have become a reality. The trend of dynamic, high-level political exchanges between the two states continues to the present day.

In 2004, the DPRK was visited by Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov (July 4-5), who conducted very intense negotiations in Pyongyang. In particular, a new protocol on the exchange between the states' respective Ministries of Foreign Affairs was signed. Such a high level of Russia-North Korea political dialogue demanded continuous consultation and synchronization, which was realized during this visit.

Minister Lavrov's meeting with Kim Jong Il was a 90-minute conversation, during which the Minister personally transmitted a message from President Putin. Many experts were surprised when Pyongyang accepted, with understanding and composure, the explanations for Russia's joining the U.S.-sponsored Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI), particularly given that the program is often seen as directed against North Korea. This understanding is further evidence of the special status of Russia-DPRK bilateral relations. At the follow-up press-conference dedicated to the results of the meeting, Minister Lavrov stated that Kim Jong Il expressed his gratitude for the confirmation of Russia's readiness and determination to develop relations with Pyongyang on the basis of the 2000 Treaty on Friendship, Good-Neighborly Relations and Cooperation. In that agreement, both parties, among other things, took obligations "to refrain from... participation in any actions and measures, aimed against the sovereignty, independence and territorial wholeness of the other party." Kim Jong Il also underlined North Korea's gratitude for Russia's support following the DPRK tragedy at the railway station Ryongchon in April 2004, as well as for the 35,000 tons of grain sent by Russia. In Minister Lavrov's words, "the leader of the DPRK expressed gratitude for the continuously felt support given by Russia."

The two nations reached an understanding that within the framework of the Six-Party Talks of the final agreement on the regulation of the nuclear problem on the Korean peninsula, that it is necessary to confirm North Korea's right to peaceful development of a nuclear energy complex, given Pyongyang's assurance to participate in the NPT and activities of the International Atomic

Energy Agency. “We sensed that our Korean friends have an understanding of this particular position of Russia,” Minister Lavrov noted.¹⁵

In 2005, the active dialogue and exchange of delegations between the Russian Federation and the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea in the fields of politics, economics, culture, science and technology continued. DPRK representatives took part in Moscow celebrations marking the 60th anniversary of victory in the Great Patriotic War, and in August and October, high-level Russian delegations headed by the Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary Representative of the Russian Federation President in Far-East Federal District Pulikovskiy, attended two different celebrations in Pyongyang commemorating the 60th anniversary of the liberation of Korea and the 60th anniversary of the founding of the North Korean Labor Party. On both occasions the Russian delegation was greeted by Kim Jong Il.¹⁶ Additionally in 2005, the chairman of the State Duma’s Committee for International Affairs, Konstantin Kosachev, visited Pyongyang, St. Petersburg Governor Valentina Matvienko paid a visit to North Korea on December 5–6,¹⁷ and Primorsky Krai Vice-Governor Gorchakov visited North Hamkyung Province. North Korean Foreign Commerce Minister Rim Kyong Man visited Moscow and the Russia Far East in August.

In the same year, the two countries’ Foreign Ministers maintained active and constant communication. In response to an April 2004 visit to Pyongyang by Evgeny Afanasiev, head of the Foreign Ministry’s First Asian Department, the North Korean Foreign Ministry’s Third Department head Sim Kuk Ryong visited Moscow, Khabarovsk, and Vladivostok in June 2005. During the second half of the year, during which two sessions of the Six-Party Talks took place, including the meeting that produced the September 19 Joint Statement, Russian Deputy Foreign Ministers accepted the DPRK Ambassador Pak Ui Chun seven times.¹⁸ The DPRK Ambassador was again accepted by the Russian Deputy Foreign Minister on February 6, 2006. During these meetings, a number of different topics were discussed, but the Six-Party Talks and related issues invariably took center stage.

In addition, the legal and contractual basis of Russia-DPRK bilateral relations has been constantly expanding. During the period 1996-2005, roughly 40 intergovernmental and interdepartmental agreements were concluded, in the areas of air communication, customs, timber, fishery, navigation satellites, investment encouragement and double taxation avoidance, and anti-crime cooperation. In December 2005, Pyongyang productively hosted the Russia-North Korea Fishery Area Cooperation Joint Commission’s 19th meeting.

Economic cooperation

Critics of Russia-DPRK relations usually point to Russia’s limited financial resources and its weak position in the North Korean economy. There is some merit to this statement, but it is not entirely accurate. In reality, the commodity turnover between the two states had dropped from US\$1 billion, during the peak of the Soviet-DPRK trade in the late 1980s, to US\$80 million in 1999. The latter amount appears especially insignificant when compared to the US\$600-700 million in

¹⁵ Russian Foreign, press-conference dealing with the outcome of the visit to the DPRK on July 5, 2004, shorthand report, 1541-06-07-2004, www.mid.ru.

¹⁶ www.mid.ru, February 6, 2006.

¹⁷ RIA Novosti, December 5, 2005.

¹⁸ Website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia, www.mid.ru, July-December 2005.

commerce between the DPRK and the PRC or ROK. However, this index has been continuously growing and during 2000–2005, it grew from US\$105 million to US\$172.3 million, an increase of 64%. The value of Russian exports for the first nine months of 2005 reached US\$168.7 million, while imports were estimated at US\$3.6 million. Russia's main export items were, oil products (63%), ferrous metal and steel production (8%), and machinery and equipment (8%).¹⁹ With trade turnover between Pyongyang and Tokyo consistently declining, Russia's trade volume drew even with Japan's in 2005.²⁰

At the same time, it should be noted that of the overall bilateral economic trade between Russia and North Korea, 80% consists of cooperation and investment between North Korea and Russian regional areas. The most active regions are Siberia and the Far East, including the following areas: Republic of Sakha (Yakutia), Buryatya, Sakhalin, Omsk, Kemerovskaya and Magadanskaya. Other key partners are the Khabarovskiy and Primorsky Krai areas. Indeed, Khabarovskiy Krai trade with the DPRK in 2004 increased 66% and reached US\$123 million. Furthermore, nineteen companies from Khabarovskiy Krai have invested in North Korea. In 2004, 12,000 North Korean tourists visited the region.²¹ Primorsky Krai (Maritime Province) is also active in cooperation with the DPRK. During 2002-2005, fifteen North Korean economic delegations, including one led by DPRK Foreign Commerce Minister Lim Kyong Man visited the area. More than 10 North Korean trade companies operate in the province. The regional trade volume in 2001-2004 increased fourfold and reached US\$9.3 million, with exports totaling US\$9.2 million. Traditionally, North Korean workers have been involved in forest harvesting operations in the Amur and Khabarovskiy Krai areas; they are also now involved with construction and agriculture throughout Russia. In 2004, the Russia Federal Immigration Service issued in 14,000 licenses for the employment of North Korean laborers in Russia.²²

Notably, investment cooperation has recently resumed. Representative Pulikovskiy inspected a recently completed glass-works factory during one of his visits to Pyongyang in 2005. While 40% of the factory's product will remain inside the DPRK, 60% will be exported, mainly to Russia.²³ More importantly, Kim Jong Il told Pulikovskiy that, in cooperation with Russia investors, reconstruction of the North Korean heavy industry flagships Kim Chaek Iron Works and the Sonbong Oil Refinery has recommenced.²⁴

In December, St. Petersburg Governor Valentina Matvienko led a large group of representatives from the city's leading industrial firms, including Kirovskiy shipbuilding plant, Silovye Mashiny (a machine- building company), and Lendorstroy Co. The delegation had an audience with DPRK Premier Park Pong Ju and offered a gift of road building machines to its North Korean hosts. In addition, Governor Matvienko also signed a sister city agreement with the North Korean harbor city Nampo.²⁵

¹⁹ www.mid.ru, February 06, 2006.

²⁰ Lim Wonhyuk, "Kim Jong Il's Southern Tour: Beijing Consensus with a North Korean Twist?" (The Brookings Institution 2006) p. 6.

²¹ www.mid.ru, February 06, 2006.

²² www.mid.ru, February 06, 2006.

²³ RIA Novosti, October 11, 2005.

²⁴ RIA Novosti, October 10, 2005.

²⁵ RIA Novosti, December 6, 2005.

Humanitarian cooperation

As the saying goes, man shall not live by bread alone. In that spirit, Russia occupies a leading role in North Korean cultural affairs. The Russian language continues to be first among foreign languages studied (about 60%) in North Korea. Elite musical groups from Russia regularly visit Pyongyang, including the Presidential Orchestra, the Moscow Kremlin Choir, the State Academic Ensemble of Folk Dance under the leadership of Igor Moiseev, and the Ensemble of Folk Singing and Dancing of the Ministry of Internal Affairs. These performances are always attended by Kim Jong Il.

Bilateral cooperation has also been dynamic in education, and student exchange programs have recommenced. During the 2000-2001 academic year, the Russian Ministry of Education allocated 10 state scholarships for North Korea, and in the 2001-2002 academic year, this number jumped to 35. Russian students presently study at the Pyongyang Conservatoire and Pedagogic (Normal) University. A number of exchange agreements were signed in 2001, including an agreement on scientific cooperation between the Russian Academy of Sciences and the Academy of Sciences of the DPRK; a contract on cooperation between the Pushkin State Institute of Russian Language and the Pyongyang Institute of Foreign Languages; an agreement on cooperation in the fields of science, technology and education between the Far-Eastern State Technical University and Pyongyang Kim Chaek Polytechnic University; and an agreement between the M.V. Lomonosov Moscow State University and Kim Il-Sung University.

In August 2004, in Moscow, the president of the DPRK Academy of Sciences signed a new cooperation agreement with the Russian Academy of Sciences. Both the Ensemble of Folk Dance under Moiseev and the Ensemble of Folk Singing and Dancing of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Russian Federation visited Pyongyang twice that year, and again, Kim Jong Il attended each performance.

North Korean interest in the study of the Russian language was confirmed by the stunning success of a team of North Korean middle school pupils, who won almost all the prizes at the June 2004 Russian Language International Competition organized by the Pushkin Institute. Last year, numbers of Korean students studying at institutes of higher education in Siberia and the Far East increased greatly. Only the strong base of Russia-DPRK cooperation enabled North Korean educational administrators to overcome a number of psychological barriers: a fear of sending students to a “bourgeois” environment, and resistance to receiving education on a commercial basis. In 2003, tuition was paid for 32 North Korean students studied, in addition to those enjoying state sponsorship by the Russian Federation.

The Terney incident

Of course the present state of amicable bilateral relations does not mean the Russia-North Korea relationship is without problems. A recent story concerning an incident where the crew of the Russian motor ship *Terney* was detained by North Korean patrol boats illustrates this reality. On December 7, 2005, the Russian cargo ship was transporting cars from Pusan, South Korea to Vladivostok—the administrative center of Primorsky Kray, Russia. Due to a storm, the ship changed course and found itself in North Korean territorial waters six miles from Cape Musudan, North Korea’s secret ballistic missile testing area. As a result, the Russian ship was detained by North Korean patrol boats and delivered to Kim Chaek harbor. The *Terney* was not released by

North Korean authorities until December 20th. Initially, Pyongyang accused the ship of being in violation of its national territorial waters, and was in no hurry to complete the investigation of the incident.

In order to secure the release of the ship and its crew, Moscow had to exercise a significant amount of diplomatic leverage on North Korea. The Russian Consul General from the city of Chongjin, followed by the Ambassador to Pyongyang, traveled to Kim Chaek harbor to negotiate with the North Korean side. The Russian Foreign Ministry then called the Ambassador to North Korea in Moscow and twice expressed serious concerns at the unreasonably protracted investigation process and finally demanded that the ship be allowed to leave DPRK territorial waters immediately.²⁶

On one hand, the story reflects traditional North Korean sentiments of extreme jealousy and hyper-sensitivity about security matters and an overly suspicious attitude toward any foreign presence. On the other hand, the story demonstrates that although North Korean rhetoric, particularly the stock phrase “personal friendship between our two states’ leaders,” did not immediately resolve the situation, it seemed to play a role in facilitating the final resolution. Given the initial North Korean perception that the ship was attempting to penetrate a highly secretive military area, the complicated investigation was resolved in a relatively smooth manner and within a short period of time. It is clear that such a comparatively happy ending would have been unimaginable only a few years before during the “Yeltsin epoch.” Regardless, the DPRK’s Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) report, issued on December 20, 2005, emphasized that the decision to release the ship was made “taking into consideration North Korea-Russia relations.”

At the same time, this incident revealed that the process of bilateral political rapprochement has certain limits. It is quite possible that the story has another dimension: Pyongyang may have been signaling disappointment over a lack progress in the Russia-DPRK relationship.

Russia’s role as a “window” into the modern world for North Korea

Notwithstanding the incident mentioned above, Russia has become a window into the modern world for the DPRK and its leaders. Moscow is the only state capable of sustaining a stable dialogue with Pyongyang, allowing it—to a certain extent—to assist DPRK leaders to reconsider traditional positions both in internal and external politics, integration into the world community, and increased participation in regional matters. Such an unprecedented level of cooperation and bilateral relations (exceeding even the period of Soviet-Korean friendship) has opened exclusive avenues for Moscow, granting it special knowledge and awareness of the situation in Pyongyang. This capability is not well known to the world, and it is sometimes purposefully ignored and underestimated.

The role of Russia in North Korea today is indeed unique. Using its “special” relations in the political sphere, Moscow indirectly stimulated both the beginning of economic reforms in North Korea and its gradual involvement in the processes of international cooperation in Northeast Asia. These two variables are in some ways connected. It is important to remember Kim Jong Il’s two visits to Russia by railway were primarily justified by Kim’s intention to see the results of market reforms in Russia for himself. Coming to Moscow in August 2001, Kim Jong Il told

²⁶ www.mid.ru, 2703-20-12-2005.

President Putin: “Now, I am assured that my councils informed me not quite correctly. They only described to me negative results of Russia’s transit from planned economics to market: drastic fall of industrial production, living standards of the most part of the population, growth of unemployment, etc. But now I see, that economic reform in the Russian Federation gave also evident positive results.”²⁷

During this visit, Kim Jong Il inferred that not all transitions to a market economy need occur like Romania’s. In other words, Kim’s fate need not be the same as Ceausescu’s. This is perhaps the most important thing Kim learned from seeing Russia’s market reforms up close, and it is often underestimated by international observers.. In Russia, as well as in almost all other CIS countries, former communist leaders were not only not persecuted, but also managed to maintain their leadership in new democratic systems.

The warm relations between Russia and the DPRK gave rise to the possibility that Russia could function as an intermediary between North Korea and the rest of the world, particularly the United States, Japan, and possibly even South Korea. This potential was illustrated during a visit by Foreign Minister Ivanov to the ROK and DPRK in July 2002. He was able to effectively assist Pyongyang and Seoul in overcoming a pause in negotiations after an armed incident between naval vessels in the Yellow Sea in the previous month. Furthermore, during ministerial meetings at the ASEAN Regional Forum talks in Brunei Darussalam that same month, a successful meeting between DPRK Foreign Minister Paek Nam-sun and U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell was made possible by the efforts of the Russian Foreign Minister. Russia provided the same services during preparations for the visit of the Prime Minister Koizumi to Pyongyang in September 2002, where the Japanese leader expressed gratitude to the President Putin. This “double diplomacy” appears to have become a new tradition in Russia-North Korea exchanges. In the summer of 2004, newly appointed Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov repeated visits to both Korean states.²⁸ Moscow has attempted to play a similar role in the ongoing Six-Party Talks.

Russia’s role in the Six-Party Talks

Immediately after the present nuclear crisis began in late 2002, Russia formulated its approach to the problem:

1. Moscow firmly advocates the strict observance of the NPT and the non-nuclear status of the Korean peninsula, believing it is expedient to observe the 1994 U.S.-DPRK Framework Agreement that lays down the foundation for securing such status.
2. Russia believes that all problems should be settled through peaceful negotiations between the interested parties, primarily the DPRK and the U.S., in order to remove existing concerns.
3. Russia’s stance is that possible complications of the situation should not prevent the development of inter-Korean dialogue as well as other processes involving dialogue on the peninsula.

²⁷ K. Pulikovsky, *Eastern Express: Around Russia Together with Kim Jong Il*, Moscow, 2002, pp. 63-64 and 167-168.

²⁸ A. Vorontsov, “The Twin Shot of Sergey Lavrov. The Head of Russia Diplomacy visited Seoul and Pyongyang,” *Vremya Novostey*, May 5, 2004.

Russia was the first among the interested nations to formulate the “package solution” and put it on the table before the DPRK, U.S., China, Japan, and South Korea.²⁹ Russia supported follow-up discussions based on DPRK proposals for the successful resolution of the crisis. At first the U.S. counted on conducting such negotiations by proxy, but following active diplomacy by all of the interested states, the U.S. was convinced to engage in direct negotiations. Washington intended to conduct these talks with the participation of only China, Japan and South Korea, with an eye toward binding these nations to its strategy of a “unified front,” making them “foot the bill” for any assistance to the DPRK in the event that a compromise was achieved. Russia was able to join the “multilateral group” only at the eleventh hour, thanks largely to the insistence of the DPRK leadership, which correctly assessed the role Russia could play as a “balancer” to help ensure a just solution.

However, Russia does not maintain a unilaterally pro-Pyongyang position, as Western commentators sometimes argue. For example, following North Korea’s withdrawal from the NPT on January 10, 2003 and its decision to suspend participation in the Six-Party Talks on February 10, 2005, official Russian representatives expressed concern, and stated that such actions did not correspond to the goal, supposedly shared by the DPRK, of denuclearization of the Korean peninsula.³⁰ Taking these facts into consideration, as well as the results of the Russia-U.S. and G-8 summits from 2002-2005 and Russia’s decision to join the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI), President Putin has a firm basis from which to argue that Moscow’s non-proliferation “positions are very close with the American partners.”³¹ [Please see author’s Epilogue for an update.]

Russia will strictly carry out its obligations as a member of the international antiterrorist coalition. Consequently, during the past three years Moscow’s positions on non-proliferation and disarmament agreements, including those in relation to North Korea, have been toughened and are now practically identical with those of President Bush. Specifically, the Russia-U.S. summits in June 2006 (St. Petersburg) and September 2003 (Camp David) produced toughly-worded documents which President Putin signed; the G-8 meeting in Evian in June 2003 created the G-8 Declaration on Non-Proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction; and Russia joined the American-led PSI at the Sea Island, Georgia G-8 Summit in June 2004. Russia’s policy in favor of complete and irrevocable liquidation of all military nuclear programs in North Korea is not just a declaration, but a program of concrete actions. It appears that such strict behavior on the part North Korea’s closest partner may have disciplined Pyongyang and increased in its responsiveness and flexibility in the Six-Party Talks.

At the same time, Russia often prefers to express concern and disagreement through private bilateral channels—and with much consideration and discretion—rather than by way of public rhetoric. Unfortunately, the Six-Party Talks, despite the success of its fourth round (which produced the Joint Statement of September 19, 2005), and the beginning of a fifth round (November 2005), continue to face considerable difficulties. In the wake of North Korea’s test of missiles and a nuclear device in July and October 2006, the United States has sought to engage its allies for support of sanctions against the DPRK and to obtain a UN mandate for further isolation and weakening of the Pyongyang regime. However, North Korea will hardly wait patiently for its

²⁹ A. Vorontsov, “Korea Peninsula nuclear crisis and the six-party diplomatic process,” *Russian Analytica*, Volume 2, September 2004, p. 177, (English Edition).

³⁰ www.mid.ru, Janury 2003, February 2005.

³¹ “Bush, Putin Focus on Nonproliferation, Russian WTO Accession,” <http://usinfo.state.gov>, September 16, 2005.

own strangulation, so one should be prepared for further unpleasant surprises. Moscow continues to regard the Six-Party Talks as a unique mechanism worth carefully preserving, not only because its top priority is to settle the nuclear issue, but also because it may be expanded as the participants see fit. Since a multilateral diplomatic format is optimal in Northeast Asia, with time the six-party process can become a framework for dialogue on the terms of Korean unification and other issues. In essence, it is the first step toward the creation of a regional political structure in Northeast Asian history.

One more very important function of the process is to foster productive bilateral discussions, including face-to-face meetings of the heads of the U.S. and North Korean delegations. At the same time, it is understood that a multilateral negotiating format will provide an “umbrella” for future bilateral U.S.-North Korean dialogue. Thus, Russia needs to work on a forecast of future developments in the nuclear crisis so that it may generate a long-term (two decades) “road map” toward a Korean settlement.

Russia’s strategic plan for North Korea

Russia regards a peaceful transformation of the DPRK regime as realistic and achievable. Therefore the goal of a “soft landing” and an updated and modified “engagement” policy remains a top priority. Russia’s strategy toward the Korean peninsula includes the following points:

1. The principal objectives of Russia’s strategy in Northeast Asia are peace, stability and development. Essential to these goals are securing the stable peaceful development of the entire region, including Korea, and deepening friendly cooperation with regional states. Other goals, including preventing the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, stabilization of democracy, and observation of human rights, no matter how important to some of Russia’s partners, should be secondary. Achieving the first and principal goal does not exclude achieving the whole complex of goals, but rather is a precondition for achieving them.
2. The best option for solving the problems of the peninsula is turning the DPRK into a non-aggressive, cooperative state that would pursue social and economic development. From Russia’s viewpoint, a warranted and desirable situation, provided the necessary conditions are in place, would be the unification of the two Korean states in the interest of the creation of a united, peaceful, and prosperous Korea that is friendly to Russia.
3. To secure such developments, international assistance for the transformation of the DPRK is necessary. However, North Korea must retain its sovereignty, based on recognition of the undesirability of a regime collapse or forced change through the use of military force. Such transformation could include the following:
 - A. Modification of the country’s economic system through the introduction of market levers, particularly allowing increased autonomy and economic decision-making for independently performing business units. These reforms should first be implemented with regard to state property, under the guise of deepening their participation in international cooperation while retaining the existing political system. These processes have in essence been underway since July 2002. A useful reference point here could be the development of South Korea in the 1960s, based on three major “pillars,” namely: regulation of the economy by the government using statist

planning principles; export orientation utilizing external financial and technological resources; and a leading role for large financial and industrial groups. It is important for the North to recognize that South Korea made its economic breakthrough while retaining its dictatorial regime, and began democratization at a later stage.

- B. A step-by-step transfer from a totalitarian system to an authoritarian system of running the state. Reports began to appear in November 2004 suggesting that Kim Jong Il is taking measures to reduce the scope of his personality cult, allowing one to presume that the groundwork for such a transfer is already being prepared. In the future, there should be a transfer to the East Asian model of controlled democracy.
- C. Gradual liberalization of state ideology while retaining the controllability and unity of society within the framework of nationalism and “statehood.”
4. The task of the international community is to offer to the DPRK a program of changes that would not include a “secret agenda,” inspiring suspicion in Pyongyang. The leading role in such a program should probably be played by South Korea. It should be kept in mind that such a program could take as much time as is required for a transition from the current generation of political leadership, which could be 15 to 20 years.³²
 5. From the viewpoint of its own interests, Russia should initiate preparations for such a program with the participation of leading nations and international organizations. As a result of assistance given for the introduction of gradual reforms by Kim Jong Il, the country will have an opportunity to develop socially and economically, without the need of a “nuclear deterrent” as well as other weapons of mass destruction, which the DPRK would have to voluntarily give up. But in such a situation, it is likely more appropriate to compare North Korea to South Africa or Ukraine, rather than Libya.
 6. Russia can play a very important role in the resolution of the DPRK’s energy problems. Moscow recognizes that Pyongyang’s strong commitment to the development of nuclear energy is defined not only by military purposes and factors of national pride but also, and perhaps more importantly, by legitimate economic need. As in the cases of Japan, South Korea and many other countries, nuclear energy is the only accessible and effective energy source given limited natural resources. Therefore, the subject of a light water reactor (LWR) for North Korea can hardly be removed from the agenda of the Six-Party Talks.

Taking into consideration the fact that Russia intends to play an active role in the development of global energy sources, and the fact that it emphasized the subject during the G-8 summit in St. Petersburg in July 2006, Moscow is ready to offer bold energy proposal to the Korean peninsula. Therefore, it was apparently not by chance that immediately after the completion of the fourth round of Six-Party Talks, Alexander Rumyantsev, the head of the Russian Atomic Energy Agency, was quick to assert that Russia was ready to construct an “atomic power plant” in the DPRK under proper conditions.

³² Georgi Bulychev and Alexander Vorontsov, “Korean Peninsula: Russia’s Priorities,” *Russian Analytica*, Vol. 3, December 2004, pp.58-59, (English Edition).

Such ideas are deliberated by a number of Russia analysts. It is frequently pointed out that the USSR was a pioneer in the development of peaceful nuclear energy in the DPRK under a 1985 agreement on the construction of two VVERs (pressurized water-to-water energy reactors). Russian specialists conducted a large amount of work, including a geological survey of the DPRK which found that there were few attractive sites for a light water reactor. Although work was stopped with the breakup of the USSR (and North Korea did not repay Soviet credit), the 1985 agreement was not abrogated and is still binding. Russia could restart its work at any time and hope to get its money back eventually. It would be only necessary to revoke the 1993 Presidential Decree prohibiting nuclear cooperation with DPRK after the present crisis is resolved. However, under the current circumstances it appears this is a long-term goal.

Russia should propose its own LWR project in the framework of a re-born Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO) or another similar structure. There are strong arguments in favor of such a course. "A Russian LWR would cost much less than any alternative. In fact, North Koreans now prefer buying Russian-made trucks and tractors, rather primitive by international standards, rather than sophisticated Western ones. Russian models are simpler to operate, less demanding, and thus more reliable."³³ The author of this "bold idea" also puts forward another, rather radical proposal:

In the event of the U.S. not yielding and not allowing the construction of a reactor on North Korean soil, why not construct the LWR across the Korean-Russian border, perhaps by KEDO, legally as North Korean property, managed by North Koreans (with Russian technical assistance), automatically connected to the Russian grid and maybe to the Chinese one, with the DPRK able to export excessive energy? All the issues of technical maintenance, IAEA safeguards, verification, and spent fuel disposal, can be solved without any problem by reason of the LWR being on Russian territory, Russia being a legal nuclear power.

Once the process of construction started, the DPRK would have no reason to postpone implementation of its obligations. The problem of 'physical confidence building measures' with the DPRK will eventually be solved through further confidence building, not by a concrete edifice in Shinpo, even one painted in stars and stripes. What about the South Korean reactor that Southerners are desperate to build 'in their own backyard?' Such a works could be constructed later in Shinpo, in line with the development of inter-Korean cooperation and in order to satisfy the rising power needs of the fast growing economy. ROK is short of places to construct new reactors anyway. But this could happen independent of the framework of the Six-Party Talks and on a more solid economic and financial basis.³⁴

Therefore, there are a number of interesting and promising variants of Russia returning to the Korean peninsula not only as a supplier of hydrocarbon energy resources but also as an active player in the peaceful development of nuclear energy.

Conclusion

Developments in Russia-North Korea relations during last six years indicate that a consistent level and quality of interaction can be maintained that is satisfactory to both nations. Russia, through its policy of bilateral diplomacy and pragmatism, has succeeded, at least to some extent, in bringing Pyongyang closer in line with the norms of the international community, and in fostering the

³³ Georgy Bulychev, "A Russian Role in Resolving the North Korea Problem?" Japan Focus. Posted October 2, 2005, <http://japanfocus.org/article.asp?id=409>.

³⁴ Ibid.

involvement of North Korea in multilateral cooperative formats. Two particular examples confirm this thesis. The signing the 2000 Treaty on Friendship, Good-Neighborly Relations and Cooperation—the first such principal document signed by Pyongyang with a non-socialist country, included clauses regarding the recognition of the basic norms of international law. In addition, Pyongyang’s agreement to take part in trilateral meetings (Russia-DPRK-ROK) on a railroad connection project held in Moscow³⁵ demonstrated for the first time a willingness to overcome traditional reluctance to join any multi-lateral economic cooperation forum. On one hand, this represents the potential of Moscow-Pyongyang “trustful” relations. On the other hand, it is an example of a de-facto engagement policy in action.

However, this affirmation does not deny the fact that both sides consider and use bilateral relations for utilitarian purposes within the context of their respective geopolitical strategies. President Putin’s team did not conceal the fact that it considered the restoration of cooperation with North Korea as a key means by which to improve relations with South Korea. The formula, “the road to Seoul lies through Pyongyang” is indicative. Additionally, this statement illustrates one of the strongest arguments of supporters of Russia’s present foreign policy approach, in opposition to proponents of one-sided support for Washington. Supporters of the present policy stress that against a tide of rapidly increasing inter-Korean dialogue and rapprochement, to cut ties with Pyongyang means Russia would lose not only the North, but South Korea as well.

A similar strategy is also employed by North Korea. Pyongyang has always strived to maximize its positions vis-a-vis Russia and China (as well as other players) using the divisions—often quite effectively—between the two to play them off against each other to North Korea’s benefit. The three Putin-Kim summits during a span of less than two years (2000-2002), for example, was a clear signal to Beijing that a Russian alternative exists for North Korea.³⁶ Over the last two years, however Pyongyang has appeared to play the China card.³⁷ However, this fact does not indicate, as some western observers have argued,³⁸ that China-North Korea or Russia-North Korea relations have suffered as a result. It is unreasonable and simply ridiculous to conduct summits every year in any case. These developments simply reflect fluctuations in Pyongyang’s specific diplomatic approach.

The Russian role in the Six-Party Talks is not as visible as China’s but has been very substantial. It is important to remember that the DPRK rejected the offer to join multilateral talks in 2003 without Russia’s participation. The irony is that although some countries opposed Moscow’s participation, it is Russia that made the Six-Party Talks possible. Thus, the high level of political ties and intimacy between Moscow and Pyongyang is evident. However, this intimacy is a result of Russia’s considerate diplomatic style. Therefore, Russia should continue to adhere to such a line in its policy toward the Korean peninsula, at least in the near term.

Epilogue

³⁵ *Moscow News*, February 27, 2006.

³⁶ G. Bulychov, A. Vorontsov. “Pyongyang plays the contradictions among Moscow, Washington and Beijing,” *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, Moscow, August 26, 2002.

³⁷ Lim Wonhyuk, “Kim Jong Il’s Southern Tour: Beijing Consensus with a North Korean Twist?” The Brookings Institution, March 10, 2006.

³⁸ Yoshinori Takeda, “Putin’s foreign policy toward North Korea,” *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific Advance Access*, March 3, 2006, (doi:10.1093/irap/lci141), p.15.

Despite the warmth of Russia-North Korean relations over the past six years, recent events influenced ties in different directions. From one perspective, the fact that Moscow supported UN Security Council Resolutions 1695 in July and 1718 in October 2006, respectively condemning North Korea's missile and nuclear tests, inevitably cooled the atmosphere to some extent. Pyongyang paid attention also to speculations spread by media arguing that Moscow sacrificed the DPRK for Russian interests in Georgia in negotiations over resolution 1718. For example, the *Washington Post* wrote that "Russia softened its opposition [to resolution 1718] after Rice agreed in a phone conversation with Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov to drop U.S. opposition to a Russia-backed resolution criticizing its neighbor Georgia..."³⁹ (Emphasizing the existence of a hypothesis about a deal between Moscow and Washington concerning the "exchange" of Korea for Georgia, it should be pointed out that there is no proof of the existence of such a deal).

At the same time the DPRK leader did not omit Russia from attempts to explain to the world that a one-sided policy of increasing pressure on North Korea merely creates a vicious circle, in which sanctions had pushed Pyongyang to act in accordance with its principle "answer by dialogue to a dialogue, but with super-rigidity to rigidity"; the potentiality of this response itself becomes a source for even more severe sanctions from the outside world, and so on. In this way, the logic of escalation of sanctions will sooner or later lead to a discussion of a "collective use of force" against North Korea.⁴⁰

It is significant that the statements from Russia's Foreign Ministry about the nuclear test in North Korea contain appeals for a settlement within the framework of the Six-Party Talks, always taking into account North Korea's real concerns over its national security. Moscow was sending a signal that sanctions were not a goal in themselves. At present, in order to prevent Pyongyang from being completely "sealed off" from the rest of the world – which will lead to an escalation of tensions – it is much more important to propose that North Korea consider alternatives to its one-sided build-up of defense potential. This logic can only be shown to North Korea through negotiation.

Not by chance, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister A. Alekseev happened to be the first foreign emissary to visit Pyongyang, doing so on October 13 just after the nuclear test, in an attempt to highlight the prospects of *positive* guarantees of North Korea's security (while no one but the U.S. can give Pyongyang *negative* guarantees of its security).

Simultaneously, in autumn 2006 discussion among Russian political scientists reflected some dissatisfaction with regard a perceived passivity by Moscow which became apparent in the course of North Korea's missile and nuclear tests and the subsequent adoption of the two U.N. resolutions. Critics argued that over the past few years Russia had relied too heavily on "quite diplomacy" with Pyongyang, and was not enough active in the Six-Party Talks, instead trying to avoid any additional burden.⁴¹

³⁹ Colum Lynch, "U.N. Near Agreement On N. Korea Sanctions," *Washington Post*, October 13, 2006, p. A24.

⁴⁰ A. Vorontsov, "A Few Ideas on North Korea's Nuclear Test and the US Diplomacy," *Russian Analytica*, Vol. 8, November, 2006, p. 83. (English Edition)

⁴¹ A. Vorontsov, O. Revenko, "North Korean Nuclear Crisis. Ways of Settlement," *Russian Analytica*, Vol. 20, December 2006, pp. 22-24. (Russian Edition)

As a response to the changed situation, it became apparent in December 2006 that Moscow had decided to become more active in diplomacy toward North Korea. It made strong attempts to resume discussions and gave new impulse to bilateral negotiations aimed finding solutions to Pyongyang's debt problem. If this stumbling block can be removed, Russia-North Korea cooperation can gain new momentum.