



## CHINA'S JUNIOR PARTNER

### RUSSIA'S KOREAN POLICY

Witold Rodkiewicz

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## THESES

- Russia's policy towards the conflict over the North Korean nuclear program, which in 2017-18 assumed the proportions of a serious international crisis, has been subordinated to its geopolitical goals in the region and to the strategy it is pursuing on a global scale. Its long-term goal is to prevent the reunification of the Korean peninsula under the aegis of the United States and to weaken the US's position in the region. Its short-term goal is to avert the danger of an outbreak of armed conflict on the peninsula and the possible collapse of North Korea.
- Russia's support for the reunification of the two Korean states is purely declaratory; in practice the Kremlin is striving to maintain the political *status quo* on the peninsula. At the same time, Russia wants to maximise its influence by developing economic relations and maintaining political contacts with both Koreas.
- Moscow does not view the denuclearisation of North Korea as one of its priorities. Its approach to Pyongyang's nuclear programme is instrumental; in Moscow's eyes, although the program poses certain risks for Russia, it also opens a number of opportunities. Officially, Moscow condemns Pyongyang's nuclear ambitions. However, until autumn 2017 it effectively blocked Western proposals on the UN Security Council to impose economic sanctions on the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK).
- The course of the crisis so far has demonstrated that Russia does not have sufficient tools to influence the course of events. As a consequence, it has had to accept a role as China's 'junior partner' in the Korean issue. Russia's reduced role could be best seen in August-September 2017 when, under China's influence, it reversed its position on the Security Council and approved the introduction of sanctions against the DPRK.

- The Kremlin was satisfied with the results of the June 2018 meeting between US President Donald Trump and the North Korean leader Kim Jong-un, once it turned out that they would not lead to a rapid denuclearisation of the DPRK, while at the same time reducing the risk of American military action on the Korean peninsula. In this situation, Moscow made every effort to conceal the fact that during the most severe stage of the crisis in 2017, its role turned out to be of secondary importance compared to those of Washington, Beijing and Seoul.

# I. KOREA: RUSSIA'S AMBITIONS AND INTENTIONS

Russia's reactions to the crisis<sup>1</sup> were mainly determined by Moscow's geopolitical goals regarding the Korean peninsula. The crisis itself had been triggered by a series of nuclear and missile tests carried out by North Korea, as well as by the Trump administration toughening its policy towards the regime in Pyongyang. Other important factors determining Russia's reactions included the broader context of its relations with both the United States and China, as well as its business interests on the Korean peninsula.

Moscow's fundamental and long-term geopolitical goal is to prevent the 'German reunification scenario' from happening in Korea. This would involve South Korea absorbing the DPRK while retaining its military alliance with the US and continuing to host American troops on its territory. Russia is interested in strengthening the DPRK as an anti-American buffer state, and in modifying the geopolitical order in North-East Asia by way of creating a regional security system that would reduce the role of the United States in the region. At the same time, Russia seeks to maximise its political influence and economic benefits on the Korean peninsula by developing its relations with both Korean states.

Moscow's short-term goal is to prevent the collapse of the North Korean state and the outbreak of an armed conflict on the peninsula. To achieve this, Russia is proposing to undertake major infrastructure projects (a trans-Korean gas pipeline and railways, the integration of electricity grids), which would give it additional tools of political influence, while at the same time enabling it to obtain economic benefits.

<sup>1</sup> In May 2017, the US expert on Korea Stephen Noerper wrote that "Tensions rose to the highest level since 1993/1994." 'Peninsula Tensions Spike', *Comparative Connections*, vol. 19, no. 1, p. 33, <http://cc.csis.org/2017/05/peninsula-tensions-spike/>

Russia is also treating the conflict around Korea as an instrument that it can use both to put pressure on the United States and to strengthen its relations with China. It calculates that the prospect of Russian cooperation in resolving the crisis on Korean peninsula might help to persuade Washington to maintain relations with Moscow and dissuade it from attempts to isolate Russia<sup>2</sup>. It is also intended to motivate Washington to make concessions to Russia over Ukraine. On the other hand, by cooperating loyally with China over the Korean issue, Russia intends to demonstrate to Beijing that it can be a valuable strategic partner, thus working to tighten its relations with China. This is increasingly important for Moscow, especially in the context of its worsening conflict with the US. At the same time, it seems that the Kremlin is striving to conceal the reduction in its importance in the geopolitical game over Korea which has become evident during the recent crisis. The repeated attempts to arrange either a meeting between Vladimir Putin with the leader of North Korea, or a tri-partite 'mini summit' between the Russian president and the leaders of the two Koreas, appear to serve this purpose. Moscow has also repeatedly called on the international community to establish a multilateral mechanism to resolve the conflict, which would enable it to directly influence the course and content of the negotiations.

<sup>2</sup> For example, at a press conference following his meeting with the US President in Helsinki (16 July 2018), Putin used his proposal to cooperate in the denuclearisation of the DPRK as one of the arguments against the policy of isolating Russia. He suggested that this was one of the areas in which the interests of Russia and the United States were converging.



## II. THE NUCLEAR DPRK AND RUSSIA'S GEOPOLITICAL GAINS

Reactions to the crisis on the Korean peninsula in 2017–18 showed that the denuclearisation of North Korea is not one of Moscow's principal goals. The Kremlin intends to capitalise on the problem of Pyongyang's nuclear programme, treating it as a circumstance that brings Russia certain benefits, even though it poses some risks. Russia's policy towards the DPRK's nuclear ambitions is subordinate to its regional and global geopolitical goals, as well as its economic interests.

Russia does not view the DPRK's possession of nuclear weapons as a direct threat<sup>3</sup>. Russian experts have emphasised that the North Korean nuclear and missile arsenal is not directed against Moscow, and the only risk would come from an accidental landing of a malfunctioning North Korean missile on Russian territory. It is noteworthy that once the DPRK has acquired nuclear weapons, Russia's proposals – as formulated alongside its declared support for full denuclearisation – *de facto* point towards the 'legalisation' of North Korea's nuclear status. This would be the result if Washington were to accept Russia's proposal to abandon sanctions (or at least reduce them), and to revive the Six-Party Talks which were launched in 2003 and discontinued in 2009<sup>4</sup>. Russian experts argue that the full denuclearisation of North Korea is a Utopian aim because no authoritarian regime

<sup>3</sup> "In fact, Moscow does not view the DPRK's nuclear and missile activity as an immediate military-political threat to the security of the Russian Federation," wrote the authors of a report published by the prestigious Moscow-based Institute of World Economy and International Relations (IMEMO) of the Russian Academy of Sciences in 2018. В. Михеев, А. Федоровский (ed.), *Кризис и новая повестка дня для Корейского полуострова и региональных держав*, ИММО РАН, Moscow 2018, p. 56. See also the statement by Sergey Ryabkov, Russia's deputy foreign minister, in reaction to North Korea's nuclear tests in September 2017, *Говорить о возникновении ядерной угрозы России со стороны КНДР нельзя*, TASS, 4 September 2017.

<sup>4</sup> This includes the DPRK, South Korea, the United States, China, Russia and Japan.

would unilaterally give up the security guarantees provided by its possession of nuclear weapons.

At the same time, Russia is trying to use the nuclear issue to pursue its geopolitical interests in the region. According to Russian diplomats, one of the prerequisites for the denuclearisation of the DPRK involves creating a regional security system in North-East Asia. Back in 2007, Russia had initiated discussions on such a system in the framework of the Six-Party Talks, and assumed the chairmanship of a working group appointed to devise the mechanisms and principles of this system. Moscow proposes that this system should be based on the principles of ‘indivisibility of security’ and a ‘non-bloc nature’, which in concrete terms means the dissolution or weakening of the US’s military alliances in the region, and Russia gaining a right of veto in regional security matters.

Moscow’s intention to capitalise on the problem of North Korea’s nuclear ambitions is reflected in the dual nature of Russian policy. On the one hand, the Kremlin condemns the North Korean nuclear programme and the DPRK’s withdrawal from the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, and has declared that its aim is the full and verifiable denuclearisation of the Korean peninsula. On the other, Russian diplomats and experts have consistently downplayed the North Korean nuclear and missile programme since the 1990s<sup>5</sup>. They have also accused Washington of exaggerating the threat posed by this programme in order to justify the expansion of its military presence in North-East Asia and increase pressure on the North Korean regime. The conviction in Moscow has been that that the United States is using the issue of defending the non-proliferation regime as a ‘smokescreen’ to conceal the true aim of its policy. Allegedly, this aim is to “extend its

<sup>5</sup> A sceptical assessment of North Korea’s achievements is also evident in recent analyses by Russian experts, see С. Лузянин, Чжао Хуашэн (ed.), *Российско-китайский диалог: модель 2018*, RSMD 2018, p. 27; Кризис и новая повестка..., *op. cit.*, p. 32.

control over the entire Korean peninsula (...), thereby achieving a radical shift in the military and strategic balance of power in North-East Asia”<sup>6</sup>. Russia has emphasised that the DPRK’s drive to obtain nuclear weapons was a natural consequence of the threat posed to Pyongyang by the US, which refuses to recognise the North Korean regime and normalise its relations with it. Hence, Russia has supported North Korea’s demands for ‘security guarantees’ from Washington as a *sine qua non* of the eventual denuclearisation of the DPRK. Moscow has consistently stated that any negotiations over the DPRK’s nuclear issue should proceed without using any military or economic pressure (sanctions). It has also supported North Korea’s demands for economic compensation from Western states for suspending or giving up its nuclear programme.

The most telling element of Moscow’s Korean policy was the negative position that Russian diplomacy had maintained until autumn 2017 towards the US’s initiatives (which were usually supported by other Western powers, Japan and South Korea) on the UN Security Council to impose economic sanctions against the DPRK; Russia either blocked them or insisted on their non-obligatory nature. By doing so, Russia protected the DPRK against the economic costs of its nuclear and missile policy. Considering that Moscow has repeatedly resorted to such sanctions in order to put pressure on its foreign partners (for example, the embargo on Moldovan wine imposed in 2006, the limitations on the import of goods from Ukraine introduced in summer 2013, and the economic sanctions against Turkey imposed in autumn 2016), it is difficult to believe that Russia’s resistance to the use of sanctions against the DPRK is rooted in a belief about the greater effectiveness of gentle persuasion and incentives as opposed to sanctions. However, for image-related reasons, Russia cannot openly admit that

<sup>6</sup> А. Жебин, ‘Корейский конандрум’, *Проблемы Дальнего Востока* 2/2018, p. 48. The author is a director of the Korean Studies Centre at the Far East Institute of the Russian Academy of Sciences.

its objection to the DPRK's nuclear programme is purely declarative and that it is in practice ready to tolerate it. In this context, Moscow's ambivalent attitude to the nuclear non-proliferation regime is also relevant. On the one hand, Russia is interested in maintaining the ban on the expansion of the nuclear states club, while on the other, it is inclined to draw geopolitical advantages from the DPRK and Iran violating that same ban.

### III. RUSSIA'S 'TWO KOREAS POLICY'

Russia's policy of maintaining and developing good relations with both Korean states dates back to the second half of the 1990s. It was initiated by the then foreign minister Yevgeni Primakov, who believed that Russia's exclusive focus on relations with South Korea and the *de facto* freeze of its relations with the DPRK (which was the case in 1992–95), contributed to its marginalisation in the region and the weakening of Russia's position *vis-à-vis* South Korea, and was a sign of Russian acceptance of being the United States' 'junior partner'. The attempts to rebuild Russia's relations with the DPRK which Primakov initiated were revived by President Putin shortly after he assumed office. In February 2000, Russia signed a new friendship treaty with the DPRK to replace the now-invalid treaty signed in Soviet times, and in July 2000 Vladimir Putin was the first Russian president to visit Pyongyang.

The ostentatious rapprochement with North Korea (after the first meeting, Putin met North Korean leader Kim Jong-il twice more, in 2001 and 2002) was mainly intended to improve Russia's image in Washington and Seoul as a state whose close relations with Pyongyang allowed it to act as an intermediary between the DPRK and the US. As a short-term goal, Putin tried to use his first meeting with the North Korean leader to strengthen his position ahead of the G8 summit in Okinawa (the meeting in Pyongyang was arranged as a stopover visit on President Putin's way to the summit), and use it as an argument against the plan to build a missile defence shield announced by the new US administration<sup>7</sup>. During a meeting in Vladivostok in August 2002, for the first time Russia announced its readiness to build a transit railway connection crossing the territory of the DPRK to link the Trans-Siberian Railway and the port of Busan in South Korea<sup>8</sup>.

<sup>7</sup> Putin claims to have received a promise from Kim Jong-il regarding North Korea's withdrawal from its ballistic missile programme, under certain conditions.

<sup>8</sup> Official press release on the Kremlin's website, 23 August 2002, <http://kremmlin.ru/events/president/news/27326>

During these meetings, the resumption and development of economic cooperation was announced, although the intensity of economic relations between Russia and North Korea remained very low. Although their mutual trade turnover doubled in 2001–5, to reach US\$233 million (which was a peak figure in post-Soviet times), from 2006 it fell to a mere US\$49 million in 2009, stabilising at the level of around US\$100 million in 2011–14<sup>9</sup>. The barriers included the DPRK's unpaid debt (incurred back in Soviet times), as well as North Korea's chronic shortage of convertible currencies. The only major Russian economic investment in the DPRK was the construction of a terminal at the Rajin Port worth around US\$300 million, carried out by Russian Railways (RZhD) in 2008–14. This was combined with the modernisation of a 54-kilometre long stretch of railway line connecting Rajin and the Khasan railway station located on the Russian-North Korean border<sup>10</sup>.

At the beginning of this decade, Moscow made another attempt to revive its economic cooperation with the DPRK. Above all, in 2012 it agreed to resolve the problem of North Korea's debt to the USSR of around US\$11 billion. Russia remitted 90% of this debt and split the remaining US\$1.09 billion into instalments to be paid over twenty years. The sums repaid were to be spent on financing joint investments in the field of humanitarian and energy cooperation<sup>11</sup>. Another method of developing economic cooperation involved allowing workers from the DPRK to find employment in Russia. The relevant agreement between Russia and North Korea was signed in 2007 and came into effect in December 2009<sup>12</sup>. In 2010–15, the number of permits issued by Russia to workers from

<sup>9</sup> L. Zakharova, 'Economic Cooperation between Russia and North Korea: New goals and new approaches', *Journal of Eurasian Studies* 7 (2016), figure 1, p. 156.

<sup>10</sup> L. Zakharova, *ibidem*, p. 157.

<sup>11</sup> Russia ratified this agreement in May 2014.

<sup>12</sup> Т. Троякова, 'Рабочая сила из КНДР на российском Дальнем Востоке: история и современность', *Ойкумена*, 2017, no. 2, p. 186.

North Korea doubled, from 21,000 to over 40,000<sup>13</sup>. Moreover, in 2014, after three years' pause, meetings of the Intergovernmental Commission on Trade, Economic, Scientific and Technical Cooperation were resumed, the Russian-North Korean Business Council was established, and Russian and North Korean banks opened mutual correspondent accounts to enable transactions in roubles<sup>14</sup>. All these measures failed to bring any major results. The big tri-partite investment projects (Russia-North Korea-South Korea) which Russia has proposed since the beginning of this century have remained in the realm of declarations, and in 2016–17 trade exchange between Russia and the DPRK fell again (to around US\$70 million annually)<sup>15</sup>.

Russia maintains contacts with the DPRK in the field of military and military-technical cooperation, albeit in a discrete manner; very little information on this issue is publicly available. According to official sources, the most recent contracts for the supply of Russian-made military equipment were signed in 2001<sup>16</sup>. The DPRK's military is mainly equipped with Soviet-made equipment, which is why Russia has continued to service it and provide spare parts. Russia's defence minister Sergei Shoigu revealed that "several" agreements had been signed in this field, while announcing that Russia had suspended its military-technical cooperation with the DPRK in connection with the sanctions adopted by the UN Security Council in autumn 2017. According to explanations

<sup>13</sup> L. Zakharova, 'Economic Cooperation between Russia and North Korea: New goals and new approaches', *op. cit.*, p. 158–159.

<sup>14</sup> The Commission met again in 2015; then there was a pause of two years, and another meeting was held in March 2018. L. Zakharova, 'Russia-North Korea Economic Relations' in *Joint U.S.-Korea Academic Studies* 27 (2016), p. 213, 216; <http://tass.ru/ekonomika/5054861>

<sup>15</sup> *Торговля между Россией и КНДР (Северной Кореей) в 2017 г.*, 15 February 2018, <http://russian-trade.com/reports-and-reviews/2018-02/torgovlya-mezhdurossiey-i-kndr-severnoy-koreey-v-2017-g/>

<sup>16</sup> This was a contract for the supply of armoured vehicles; В. Волощак, *Военно-техническое сотрудничество Российской Федерации и Корейской Народно-Демократической Республики с 1991 г.*, <http://militaryrussia.ru/forum/download/file.php?id=1068>

provided by Aleksandr Matsegora, Russia's ambassador to Pyongyang, these agreements cover the post-warranty servicing of Soviet- and Russian-made military equipment<sup>17</sup>.

In November 2015, Russia signed an agreement with the DPRK on preventing dangerous military activities<sup>18</sup>, pursuant to which a joint military committee was established. The committee is scheduled to hold meetings at least once a year; its first meeting was held in December 2017 in Pyongyang<sup>19</sup>. By establishing this committee, Russia has created a direct channel of communication with North Korea's armed forces (the agreement contains detailed provisions regarding the procedures of establishing direct radio contact between representatives of both countries' armed forces).

In contrast to the stagnation in Russia's economic relations with the DPRK, its economic cooperation with South Korea has flourished this century. Over fifteen years (2000–14), trade turnover rose from US\$2.8 billion to US\$25.8 billion (with a temporary decline in 2009 from US\$18 billion to US\$10 billion due to the global economic crisis). Although it declined again in 2015–16, this time to US\$13 billion, in 2017 it reached US\$19 billion. South Korean companies have carried out intensive investment activities in Russia, in particular in 2006–9, and at the end of 2016 their investments were worth US\$2.5 billion. South Korea has become Russia's sixth biggest trade partner in terms of trade volume (outside the CIS area). However, taking into account South Korea's economic

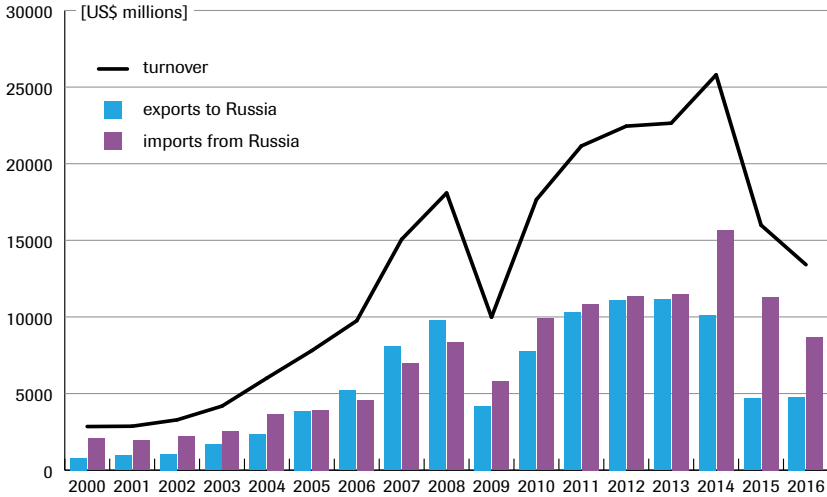
<sup>17</sup> Александр Мацегора: любое сотрудничество с КНДР сейчас упирается в санкции, RIA Novosti, 18 July 2018, <https://ria.ru/20180718/1524836372.html>

<sup>18</sup> Соглашение между Правительством Российской Федерации и Правительством Коре́йской Народно-Демократической Республики о предотвращении опасной военной деятельности, [http://www.mid.ru/foreign\\_policy/international\\_contracts/2\\_contract/-/storage-viewer/bilateral/page-20/43776](http://www.mid.ru/foreign_policy/international_contracts/2_contract/-/storage-viewer/bilateral/page-20/43776)

<sup>19</sup> See the press release published by the Embassy of the Russian Federation in Pyongyang, <http://www.rusembdprk.ru/ru/posolstvo/novosti-posolstva/601-delegatsiya-ministerstva-oborony-rossii-v-kndr>

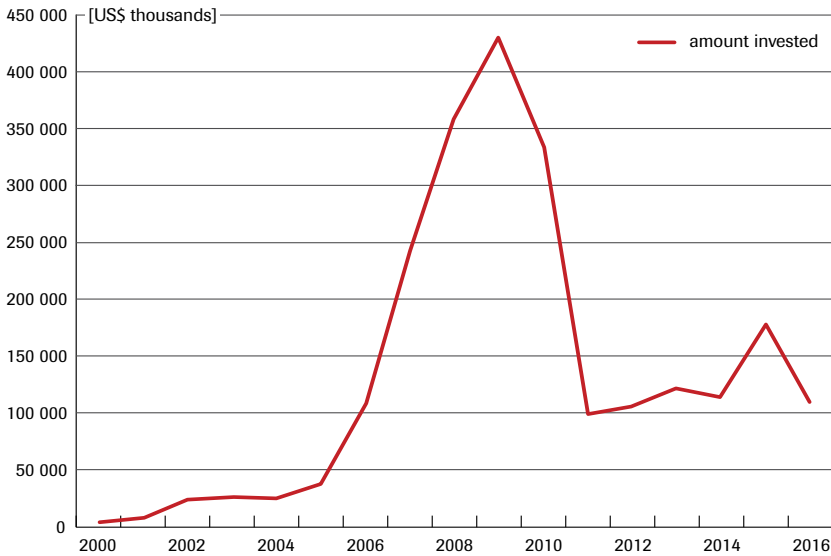


**Figure 1. Trade turnover between Russia and South Korea, 2000–16**



**Source:** Ли Чжэ Ён, 'Новая «Северная политика» и корейско-российское сотрудничество', *Валдайские записки*, No 76, Октябрь 2017, p. 6 (based on data from KITA).

**Figure 2. South Korean investments in Russia**



**Source:** Ли Чжэ Ён, 'Новая «Северная политика» и корейско-российское сотрудничество', *Валдайские записки*, No 76, Октябрь 2017, p. 7 (based on data from KEXIM).

potential<sup>20</sup> and the major investment projects announced during successive meetings between top-ranking politicians (in particular during President Putin's visit to Seoul in 2013), the results of this cooperation have not been very impressive. This has triggered "disappointment and distrust on the part of South Korea"<sup>21</sup>. At present, economic cooperation with Russia is of minor significance to South Korea: Russia's share in South Korean exports is a mere 1.2%, and 2.5% in its imports<sup>22</sup>. Even as a supplier of fuel, Russia has failed to achieve any significant position on the Korean market; for example in 2017 the import of Russian oil and liquefied gas accounted for a mere 5% of South Korea's import of these commodities<sup>23</sup>. Cooperation in the ship-building industry is of some significance, although due to the size of the South Korean ship-building sector this is rather limited<sup>24</sup>. South Korean companies (Daewoo, Samsung, STX) hold a *de facto* monopoly on the supply of ships transporting liquefied gas for the Russian state-controlled ship-owning company Roskomflot (eleven ships were launched in 2007–15, and another

<sup>20</sup> Russia's share in South Korea's foreign trade is less than 2%, and the share of South Korean investment in Russia is less than 2% of its foreign investments. Ли Чже Ён, 'Новая „Северная политика“ и корейско-российское сотрудничество', *Валдайские записки*, October 2017, no. 76, p. 6–7; <http://ru.valdaiclub.com/files/22115/>

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>22</sup> Data for 2017. The author's own calculation, based on data available on the official websites of South Korea's customs service, <http://www.customs.go.kr/kcshome/trade/TradeCountryList.do?layoutMenuNo=21031>, <http://english.motie.go.kr/en/if/tb/trade/tradeList.do>

<sup>23</sup> Calculated based on data after *Оперативные данные по статистике внешней торговли Российской Федерации за 2017 г.*, p. 1, Tab. 3, p. 6, Tab. 7, p. 10; *Оперативные данные по статистике внешней торговли Российской Федерации за I-II кв. 2018 года*, p. 1, chart 3, p. 7, chart 8, p. 12, available on the website of the Ministry of Economic Development of the Russian Federation, [http://www.ved.gov.ru/exportcountries/kr/analytic\\_kr/?analytic=26](http://www.ved.gov.ru/exportcountries/kr/analytic_kr/?analytic=26)

<sup>24</sup> In 2007–15, the annual value of export generated by the Korean shipbuilding sector was US\$27–57 billion, US\$39 billion on average. *Korea in Global Value Chains: Pathways for Industrial Transformation (Joint Project between GVCC and KIET)*, chapter 4, figure 16, p. 42, [https://gvcc.duke.edu/wp-content/uploads/Duke\\_KIET\\_Korea\\_and\\_the\\_Shipbuilding\\_GVC\\_CH\\_4.pdf](https://gvcc.duke.edu/wp-content/uploads/Duke_KIET_Korea_and_the_Shipbuilding_GVC_CH_4.pdf)

will be launched in 2020)<sup>25</sup>. The South Korean company Hyundai is involved in the construction of a floating LNG terminal for Kaliningrad<sup>26</sup>. Several South Korean companies have established joint ventures with Russian companies in the ship-building sector in the Far East, with the aim of building tankers and ice breakers on commission from Russian companies operating in the oil and gas sector and from the Russian state<sup>27</sup>.

In the context of the development of economic relations with South Korea, Moscow has openly declared that it does not intend to allow Seoul to exploit these ties to exert pressure on Russia's policy towards the DPRK<sup>28</sup>. Despite repeated declarations during the presidencies of Lee Myung-bak (2008–13) and Park Geun-hye (2013–17), the South Korean side has attempted to use economic cooperation as a 'carrot' to persuade Russia to put pressure on the DPRK, but to no avail.

<sup>25</sup> Roskomflot's official website: <http://sovcomflot.ru/en/fleet/fleetlist/item388.html>

<sup>26</sup> *Котел – регазификатор на строящемся в Южной Корее для Калининградской области плавучем СПГ-терминале (FSRU) Маршал Василевский при испытаниях поврежден. За чей счет будет замена?*, 16 May 2018, <https://neftegaz.ru/news/view/171507-Kotel-regazifikator-na-stroyaschemsya-v-Yuzhnoy-Koree-dlya-Kaliningradskoy-oblasti-plavuchem-SPG-terminala-FSRU-Marshal-Vasilevskiy-pri-ispytaniyah-povrezhden.-Za-chey-schet-budet-zamena>

<sup>27</sup> X. Zeng, *South Korean shipbuilders sign JV agreements with Russian peers*, 12 September 2017, <https://fairplay.ihs.com/ship-construction/article/4291516/south-korean-shipbuilders-sign-jv-agreements-with-russian-peers>; Initially, the agreement covered up to 29 vessels (tankers, ice breakers), but the status of these orders is unclear. 'РФ заказала у Южной Кореи строительство 29 судов, включая 15 танкеров-ледоколов', TASS, 16 July 2018, <https://tass.ru/vef-2018/articles/5376871>

<sup>28</sup> At this point it is worth mentioning an article published by Russian diplomats in 2005, in which they warned Seoul not to yield to "romantic expectations" in connection with the development of economic cooperation with Russia, and emphasised that "it is important that the authorities in Seoul should not demand that Russia should constantly put pressure on the DPRK, encourage Pyongyang to make specific decisions that the South Korean side may be interested in [...] One should not intend to achieve specific benefits at Russia's cost, to the detriment of its relations with North Korea". А. Торкунов, В. Денисов, 'Россия-Корея: взгляд из прошлого в настоящее', *Мировая экономика и международные отношения*, 2005, no. 1.

Military-technical cooperation has a special place in Moscow's relations with Seoul. In military affairs, South Korea cooperates closely with the United States. Therefore, it is a paradox that this is the field in which Russia has become an important and seemingly almost irreplaceable partner. The starting point for this cooperation, back in the second half of the 1990s, lay in the supplies of Russian military equipment as repayment of a portion of the Soviet debt inherited by the Russian Federation amounting to US\$2.1 billion<sup>29</sup>. A major improvement in the quality of this cooperation became evident following President Roh Moo-hyun's visit to Moscow in September 2004, when the Russian side agreed to repay the remaining portion of the debt by providing technology and know-how for the construction of the South Korean KSLV-1 carrier rocket and assisting in the creation of the Korean spaceport known as the Naro Space Center. Officially, this cooperation covered the civilian sector, but the experience (and probably also the technology) gained during the programme's implementation laid the essential basis for the Korean military rocket building programme. Alongside this, Russian arms-manufacturing companies (Almaz-Antey and Fakel) cooperated with South Korea on the construction and deployment of KM-SAM (Cheongung), a modern aerial and missile defence system<sup>30</sup>.

Regardless of its developing cooperation with both Korean states, Russia is not interested in the political reunification of the Korean

<sup>29</sup> 'Russia to Settle Soviet Debt in 2017', *The Moscow Times*, 17 February 2017, <https://themoscowtimes.com/news/russia-to-settle-its-soviet-debts-be-end-of-2017-57193>

<sup>30</sup> Ён Сонг Хым, *Россия и Республика Корея: взгляд из Сеула*, March 2012, <https://interaffairs.ru/jauthor/material/628>; В. Самсонова, *Сотрудничество России и Южной Кореи в области науки, техники и образования*, 30 September 2013, <http://russiancouncil.ru/analytics-and-comments/analytics/sotrudnichestvo-rossii-i-yuzhnoy-korei-v-oblasti-nauki-tekhn/>; М. Казанин, *Корейские оружейники загорелись от нашего «Факела»*, 18 April 2017, <https://vpk-news.ru/articles/36289>; S. Roblin, *South Korea is deploying its own missile shield*, 12 October 2017, <https://warisboring.com/south-korea-deploys-its-own-missile-shield/>; M. Piotrowski, 'South Korea's Ballistic and Cruise Missiles', *PISM Bulletin* 57, 18 April 2018.

peninsula, especially as the only possible scenario for such reunification (due to the two states' differing potentials) would be the absorption of the DPRK by South Korea. This is why the Russian leadership (President Vladimir Putin himself, as well as Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov), when declaring its support for the idea of a reunification of the Korean nation and promising assistance in its implementation, has at the same time formulated a number of conditions that need to be met, and which would make the prospect of reunification *de facto* unattainable. In 2013, President Putin said that the reunification process should not only be peaceful, but also that it should proceed “while taking into account the interests of both the northern and the southern part of the peninsula”, and that “nothing should be forced on the partners” during its implementation<sup>31</sup>. The requirement to take the interests of the North Korean regime during the process of reunification into account – as this is how President Putin’s declaration should be interpreted – would in practice mean blocking the process. In a debate on a hypothetical model of reunification that Russia would accept, Russian experts and diplomats have cited other conditions as well: these include the neutral status of a hypothetically united Korea (i.e. the breaking of the military alliance between South Korea and the United States), the removal of American troops, and the adoption by the unified state of a policy involving maintaining equally close relations with the United States, Russia and China. There is no doubt that the experience connected with the reunification of Germany has affected Russia’s attitude towards the possible reunification of the Koreas. According to a leading Russian expert on Korean affairs, from Russia’s point of view the emergence of a united pro-American Korea would be “equivalent to the emergence near our eastern borders of an Asian clone of NATO”<sup>32</sup>.

<sup>31</sup> President Putin’s interview for the Korean Broadcasting System: *Интервью южнокорейской телерадиокомпании KBS*, 12 November 2013, <http://krem-lin.ru/events/president/news/19603>

<sup>32</sup> A. Zhebin, ‘Russia's Vision of Re-unified Korea's Place...’, *op. cit.*, p. 113.

## IV. THE KOREAN CRISIS AND ITS CONSEQUENCES FOR RUSSIAN-CHINESE RELATIONS

The aggravation of tension around the DPRK and its nuclear & missile programme in 2017 came as a major challenge for the Kremlin, which now had to take into account that President Trump would not refrain from using force against the DPRK. An outbreak of armed conflict that could involve the use of nuclear weapons would entail a series of negative consequences for the Kremlin. Firstly, the conflict would take place on territory that borders Russia, which could cause economic losses due to the disruption to the normal operation of transportation routes in the region. Other consequences include the risk of a massive wave of refugees from the DPRK, and the risk of human and material losses caused by friendly fire. However, more importantly, the American military action might be successful (and could result in the elimination of the North Korean nuclear potential), and – in the worst-case scenario – could cause the collapse of the North Korean regime. A successful military campaign would also significantly strengthen the position of the United States, which the Kremlin considers its main geopolitical rival and a source of threat to the existence of Putin’s regime. A collapse of the DPRK would mean either the prospect of the ‘German variant’ of the reunification of Korea, or the need to carry out a military intervention together with China to maintain North Korea as a buffer state<sup>33</sup>.

On the other hand, a situation in which the DPRK yielded to the US’s demands, combined with the threat of the use of force, would not be favourable for the Kremlin because it would strengthen the position of the United States (as would a successful American military action). The further tightening of the sanctions regime

<sup>33</sup> This scenario is discussed by A. Lukin in ‘The North Korea Nuclear Problem and the US-China-Russia Strategic Triangle’, *Russian Analytical Digest* 209, 24 October 2017.

which the US proposes would be unfavourable for Russia because – if it proved successful – it could lead to the collapse of the regime in Pyongyang. Moreover, it would stand in contrast to the Kremlin’s declared hard-line attitude towards economic sanctions as an unacceptable method of pressure.

The course of the crisis so far has demonstrated that Russia does not have sufficient tools at its disposal to influence the development of events. It seems that the awareness of this fact, combined with the need to demonstrate close relations with China (triggered by the crisis in Moscow’s relations with Washington), has encouraged the Russian leadership to take an unprecedented step. This step involved formulating the initiative (together with China) of the so-called double freeze, proposed by the two countries’ foreign ministers during the Chinese President Xi Jinping’s visit to Moscow on 4 July 2018. This boiled down to the DPRK freezing its nuclear and missile tests and a concurrent suspension of joint American-Korean military exercises “on a large scale”<sup>34</sup>.

Another important fact is that during the UN Security Council sessions in August and September 2017 dedicated to adopting further sanctions against North Korea (which this time were to have been really painful for the regime), the Chinese diplomats allegedly urged their Russian colleagues not to make any delay in approving them<sup>35</sup>.

It is likely that the cases of Russian companies violating the sanctions (the smuggling of oil, illegal imports of coal and marine products) which Western intelligence services have uncovered were carried out by Moscow with the tacit agreement of China.

<sup>34</sup> For the declaration’s content, see [http://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign\\_policy/news/-/asset\\_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/2807662](http://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/2807662)

<sup>35</sup> А. Ланьков, ‘Как Россия относится к новым санкциям против Северной Кореи’, 16 January 2018, [www.carnegie.ru/commentary/75259](http://www.carnegie.ru/commentary/75259)

Officially, Beijing intended to force North Korea to make concessions and 'punish' Kim Jong-un for ignoring its 'advice' by adopting harsh sanctions. Another intention was to demonstrate to the US that China is ready to change its former policy of 'protecting' the DPRK to reduce the risk of Trump deciding to launch military action. On the other hand, China does not want to trigger the destabilisation of the regime. In this situation, Russia (whose relations with Washington have deteriorated and whose image in the West was unfavourable) could agree to do Beijing a 'diplomatic favour'.

In the diplomatic manoeuvres around the issue of North Korea, which have been ongoing for a year and a half, Moscow's role has clearly been less prominent than that of Beijing. The most evident manifestation of Beijing's dominance has been the fact that the North Korean leader Kim Jong-un has travelled to China up to three times to hold talks with China's leader Xi Jinping. It is noteworthy that his third visit was organised on 19-20 June, almost immediately after his meeting with Trump in Singapore on 12 June.

The North Korean leader's readiness to consult his decisions with Beijing stood in contrast with his ignoring the attempts by Russian diplomats to arrange a meeting between him and Putin ahead of the Singapore summit. The only thing that Russia's foreign minister Sergei Lavrov managed to achieve during his visit to Pyongyang on 31 May was a rather vague prospect of a meeting between the North Korean leader and President Putin to be held before the end of 2018. For the time being, Putin has had to make do with a meeting with Kim Yong-nam, the President of the Presidium of the Supreme People's Assembly of North Korea, in Moscow on 14 June. During this meeting, Putin reiterated his invitation to Kim Jong-un, communicated to the North Korean leader by Lavrov in May, and emphasised the flexibility of the Russian side to receive Kim Jong-un, either at the Eastern Economic Forum in Vladivostok or in the formula of a specially arranged individual



visit<sup>36</sup>. However, the North Korean leader did not appear at the Forum, and the timing of his visit to Russia remains unspecified<sup>37</sup>.

<sup>36</sup> Встреча с Председателем Президиума Верховного народного собрания КНДР Ким Ён Намом, 14 June 2018, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/57784>

<sup>37</sup> See statement by Yuri Ushakov, Aide to the President of the Russian Federation responsible for international affairs, *Ясности с возможным визитом Ким Чен Ына на форум во Владивосток пока нет*, Interfax, 24 July 2018.

## V. THE SUMMIT IN SINGAPORE FROM THE RUSSIAN PERSPECTIVE: WHAT NEXT?

Although Russia did not play a major part in making the American-North Korean summit meeting happen, Moscow welcomed the meeting's results with evident relief. For Russia, the elimination of the risk of armed conflict was the most important result. Official statements emphasised that the summit has set a precedent, and expressed optimistic expectations as to the further development of the situation around Korea. According to Russian diplomats, the meeting demonstrated that the main actors have *de facto* adopted the Russian-Chinese formula of the 'double freeze', which was intended to emphasise Russia's contribution to an (at least temporary) containment of the crisis. For their part, experts and media commentators mainly emphasised the absence of concrete conclusions in the declaration adopted at the summit. A thesis has also been formulated that the meeting was a *de facto* surrender by President Trump, because by holding this meeting he legitimised the North Korean leader and welcomed his statement regarding his readiness to negotiate the denuclearisation of the Korean peninsula (rather than to eliminate North Korea's nuclear potential). Moreover, the US President has withdrawn from the demands he had formulated ahead of the summit to request that Pyongyang produce a detailed plan for denuclearisation.

From the Kremlin's point of view, the meeting has brought nearly optimum results. The talks between Trump and Kim Jong-un have reduced the risk of an American military intervention on the peninsula to a minimum. At the same time, they did not create any clear prospect for the rapid resolution of the conflict or the elimination of North Korea's nuclear potential. In fact, they have opened up the prospect of launching a process of long-lasting negotiations and bargaining between Washington and Pyongyang, during which Moscow may attempt to act as an essential intermediary. It may also use this situation to normalise its relations with the United States and strengthen its bargaining position *vis-à-vis*

Washington, as well as to gain additional opportunities for developing its economic cooperation with both Korean states, and to rebuild its image as an independent and essential actor in the diplomatic game around Korea.

Russian diplomats have emphasised that a permanent resolution to the problem of North Korea's nuclear potential requires multi-lateral negotiations between all the interested parties (preferably in the formula of a resumption of the Six-Party Talks including the two Koreas, China, Russia, the United States and Japan). At the same time, Russia has launched attempts in the UN Security Council to ease the sanctions against the DPRK<sup>38</sup>. The Kremlin had been hoping that it would manage to use its good relations with the two Korean states to organise a spectacular meeting between the leaders of the two Koreas at the Eastern Economic Forum in Vladivostok in September 2018<sup>39</sup>. These attempts ultimately failed because the two Korean leaders declined Russia's invitation and organised a summit meeting themselves, thereby demonstrating that they had no need of Russia's mediation<sup>40</sup>.

The 2017–18 crisis has mainly demonstrated how Russia's policy of capitalising on regional tensions and North Korea's nuclear ambitions to engage in geopolitical rivalry with the United States has led to Russia becoming Beijing's 'junior partner' in the Korean issue. In the North-East Asian context, Russia's strategy of strengthening Moscow's bargaining position by nurturing its relations with a state that is attempting to obtain nuclear weapons and is in conflict with the United States (a similar strategy to that which it used towards Iran) has proved counter-productive, and

<sup>38</sup> *Россия допустила возможность поднятия вопроса о санкциях против КНДР в ООН*, RIA Novosti, 18 July 2018; 'РФ выступает за постепенное смягчение санкций против КНДР', RIA Novosti, 26 July 2018.

<sup>39</sup> М. Коростиков, *Юг и Север Кореи ждут во Владивостоке*, 30 July 2018, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/3700528>

<sup>40</sup> Statement by Yuri Ushakov, Aide to the President of the Russian Federation responsible for international affairs, Interfax, 20 August 2018.

has contributed to Russia's relative marginalisation. There is no indication that Moscow is ready to fundamentally revise the assumptions of its foreign policy; it should therefore be expected that its further actions will focus on posing as an 'essential' participant in the geopolitical game that is ongoing around Korea, and at the same time on the continued and unavoidable 'coordination' of Russia's policy with that of Beijing.

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