Russia and North Korea: From "Socialist Solidarity" to Quasi-alliance

Andrei Lankov

Abstract

This paper concludes that in general Russia prefers the status quo, i.e. a stable and divided Korea, since Russia believes that the unification might increase the geopolitical influence of its rivals and that it is might also produce much instability in the border area where Russia is especially vulnerable.

However, these goals are not very high on the Russian foreign policy agenda at the moment, and the Korean issue plays a secondary role in Moscow's policy. It means that Russia is unwilling to spend much on reaching a desirable outcome, believing it can live with other possible outcomes of the prolonged North Korean crisis. Russia over last 15 years has been a rather passive observer, and this probably will not change any time soon.

It will not be an exaggeration to say that the entire North Korean regime, as established in the late 1940s, was a creation of the Soviet occupation forces. The regime remained under strict Soviet control until the early 1950s, but since then relations between the two countries began to steadily deteriorate. Having established his own power base, Kim Il Sung began to gradually rid himself from the Soviet control. On paper, DPRK and USSR remained allies and comrades until the early 1990s, being united by the much-professed "proletarian solidarity." However, since the early 1960s and until the collapse of the USSR this solidarity rhetoric was nothing but a veneer which hid strained and sometimes nearly hostile relations.

The Kremlin was not exactly fond of the North Korean leaders and their policies, being repelled by their thinly veiled nationalism, their unwillingness to consider the Soviet interests, their tendency to waste the Soviet aid on misconceived or ambition-boosting projects and, especially, by Kim Il Sung's personality cult. The existence of this personality cult was widely known in the then USSR, making North Korea a laughing stock of broad circles of the Soviet society in the 1960s and '70s. The

This paper was submitted on December 13, 2007.

North Korean propaganda magazines, heavily subsidized by Pyongyang and easily available in the USSR, led to an unintended results, creating among the Soviet public an unflattering image of a hyper-Stalinist society, a dictatorship which was both bizarre and ridiculous.

The North Korean leaders, in their turn, saw post-Stalin Soviet Union as a harbinger of both ideological revisionism and great power chauvinism. In other words, Pyongyang leadership believed that the Soviet society had become dangerously free-thinking and might contaminate the ideologically pure North Koreans, while the Soviet leadership tended to look at Korea and other minor countries with arrogance, ordering them around and ignoring their (or their leaders') needs. This made Pyongyang wary and careful when dealing with Moscow.

Nonetheless, the USSR remained the major donor of North Korea. The shipments of Soviet aid were necessary to keep North Korean economy afloat. In some cases the aid was provided as grants, but usually it took the form of indirect subsidies, largely through subsidized trade: the Soviet state-run import companies agreed to buy sub-quality goods from North Korea, while North Korean side could purchase Soviet items if much higher quality and market value.

This aid was provided, in spite of disagreements, due to Moscow's geopolitical concerns. First, the USSR needed North Korea to remain a bulwark against US forces and sometimes even as a potential geopolitical irritant, distracting US forces and resources from elsewhere. Second, Moscow was willing to part with some money in order to keep Pyongyang at least neutral in the then ongoing Sino-Soviet quarrel (the North Korean diplomacy skillfully used the bitter rivalry of two Communist great powers, and made sure that both Moscow and Beijing would provide them with aid without attaching too many conditions).

The situation dramatically changed in the early 1990s, after collapse of the USSR. The perceived geopolitical need of countering American or Chinese influence lost its rationale and ceased to influence the Russian policy (for a while, at least). Most observers believed that the grotesquely dictatorial and remarkably inefficient regime of the Kim family was doomed and would soon collapse.

These assumptions were widely shared by the society at large. In the early 1990s, Igor Irteniev, arguably the most popular Russian satirical poet of the era, mockingly wrote of an event everybody expected to take place soon: "I still cannot sleep without a sedative / in the darkness of the night / when I imagine what happens to Kim Il Sung / in the blood-stained hands of the executioners."

Therefore it comes as no surprise that in September 1990 the Soviet Union established the diplomatic relations with South Korea. The generous aid programs (especially subsidized trade in oil) were suddenly halted, and this blow had devastating impact on the North Korean economy. In few years the trade between two countries shrank from 2.1 billion USD in 1990 to merely 140 million USD in 1994, to stay on this low level for subsequent decade.

But the mood began to change around 1995 when new voices came to be heard in Russia as well. These voices presented a more positive approach to North Korea. To a very large extent this change of mind was driven by the domestic changes in Russia itself. The pro-Western line of Kozyrev went out of fashion, and new voices, increasingly nationalist, were becoming more loud.

In the case of North Korea, the major domestic factor behind the changes in Russia's approach to this country is probably the anti-American feelings, so common in Russia nowadays. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, amidst the great hopes of perestroika, the US was usually seen as a country to emulate and follow, but from the mid-1990s hostility towards the US began to develop in Russian society. From around 1999 (the Yugoslavian War being the major turning point), the Russian perception of the US and other countries of the West tends to be negative, and this approach influences the official policies to a large degree. Nowadays the West is often seen as a cunning rival, who is driven by almost irrational hatred of all things Russian, and thus involved in persistent efforts to damage Russian domestic and international interests.

From the late 1990s, the North Korean regime, once an object of nearly universal contempt and ridicule, was increasingly seen as a proud country which is capable of standing firm against the US demands and even as a potentially useful quasi-ally. This change in perception coincided with the Kremlin's attempts to use the "North Korean card" to somehow counter-weight the US influence in North East Asia. From the mid-1990s in Russian academic articles the critique of North Korea was hushed, and augmented with critique of Western insensibilities in dealing with this very peculiar society. The earlier policy of ignoring North Korea was frequently criticized as "unproductive" and "short-sighted."[1]

These changes became more pronounced under President Putin who clearly stated that a "strong and self-confident Russia" is his major foreign policy goal. In

[1] Such opinions were expressed many times. See, for example, remarks to this effect made by a senior diplomat and scholar: Georgyi Toloraya. Koreiskii poluostrov i Rossiya. *Mezhdunarodnaya Zhizn*, December 2002.

February 2000, the DPRK and Russian Federation signed the Treaty on Friendship, Cooperation, Good Neighborliness which replaced the 1961 Treaty. Unlike the 1961 agreement, the 2000 Treaty did not stipulate military alliance between the two countries, but the Treaty still had special importance because it signified a revival of more positive stance in regard to North Korea.

More significantly, in July 2000 Vladimir Putin visited Pyongyang himself, becoming the first Russian or Soviet head supreme executive to ever visit North Korea. Paradoxically enough, in the Soviet era no General Secretary ever came to Pyongyang, in spite of all rhetoric of "friendship" and "alliance." Kim Jong Il also paid two visits to Russia. In August 2001, he crossed the entire Russia by train, coming to Moscow and Petersburg all way from Pyongyang. This prolonged and rather unusual trip caused some stirs in parts of Siberia, since it lead to a serious disruption of normal traffic at an important railway line, but it was nonetheless full of deep symbolism (and also, diplomats privately insist, contributes towards changes in the Dear General's perception of post-Communist Russia). In August 2002, Kim Jong Il came to Russia again, this time limiting his trip to Far Eastern region, where he nonetheless held a summit with President Putin.

However, it is noteworthy that all these boosts of diplomatic activity were not accompanied by any palpable revival of the economic interaction between the two countries. In 2006, for example, the trade between Russia and North Korea amounted to merely 209.7 million dollars.[2] This is less about 2% of Russia's trade with South Korea (9,301 million in 2006).[3] Generally speaking, North Korea is an insignificant trade partner from Russian viewpoint.

On the other hand, Russia is not a major trade partner of North Korea either. According to KOTRA estimates, in 2006 Russia was the fourth largest trade partner of North Korea, after China, South Korea and Thailand, but its share of trade is small, amounting to merely 6.3% of all foreign exchanges.[4]

The major Russian goal in North Korea is maintaining the stability. Like all neighboring states (above all South Korea) Russia does not want a democratic revolution to happen

---

2 *ITAR-TASS* report, 19 March 2007.

3 The data from the Russian Customs, cited by Russian National Trade Point (WTPF / UNCTAD), retrieved at http://www.rusimpex.ru, on 14 August 2007.

4 2006 년 북한 의 대외 무역 동향. 서울, KOTRA, 2007, p.9. The share was recalculated taking into account North Korea's trade with South Korea (normally reported separately, since officially Seoul does not consider North Korea a foreign state). The relevant data see: Ibid., p.28.

in Pyongyang. A crisis in North Korea is too dangerous. Even if a regime collapse does not lead to any significant and prolonged violence, it will still mean a disruption of normal life, large refugee flows and an outbreak of dangerous instability near the Russian borders. The situation is aggravated by the fact that the Russian Maritime region, adjacent to North Korea, is considered to be a very vulnerable part of the country where the central government does not exercise much control.

It seems to be likely that a collapse of the Kim Family Regime will be followed by the unification of the entire peninsula under Seoul's tutelage. If it happens, the US military and political presence might be enhanced, and this is not a development Russia would feel happy about. The disruption of profitable economic cooperation with South Korea is also a problem from the Russian point of view. Finally, the unified Korea might resort to ultra-nationalism as a way to destruct its populace from the unavoidable social and economic difficulties, and this makes more likely that territorial claims will be made towards some areas in Russian Maritime province (nowadays such claims are already being advanced by some marginal groups of Korean nationalists).

Therefore, in general Russia prefers the status quo, believing that a stable and divided Korean Peninsula serves its interest best. In regard to the future of North Korea, most Russian scholars express hopes that sooner or later North Korea would emulate China and launch slow market-style reforms.[5] However, they stress that such reforms would be impossible as long as Pyongyang does not feel itself secure enough, so on the current stage aid and cooperation are the only way to create environment to such reforms. As one can easily see, the same views are often expressed by the South Korean officials and scholars, some in a nutshell, Russia strongly supports the "sunshine policy" of Seoul. Sometimes it seems that the talks about "creating environment conducive for reforms" are hardly more than lip-service while actually Russian diplomats is quite happy to see an unreformed North Korea if the latter does not make too much trouble and remains stable. It is an open secret that the same can be applied to Seoul.

It worth noting that two major Western concerns in regard to North Korea are not

---

[5] See, for example, an article by Konstantin Asmolov, a Korean affairs specialist and historian from the major Moscow think tank: Konstantin Asmolov,. North Korea: Stalinism, Stagnation, or Creeping Reform? *Far Eastern Affairs*, Jul-Sep 2005. One should also notice an article signed by "Georgy Bulychev" (actually, a senior Russian diplomat, lifelong Korea specialist): Georgy Bulychev. A Long-term Strategy for North Korea. *Japan Focus*, February 2005. Retrieved at: http://japanfocus.org/products/details/2030.

really shared by the Russian public.

First, the human-rights issue does not play a major role in Russian foreign policy. A period of idealistic enthusiasm in the early 1990s proved to be short, so few people in Russia take seriously statements about human rights. Neither the Russian government nor the Russian public shows any enthusiasm for crusades in the name of human rights in distant lands. The entire human rights issue is often perceived as a crafty devise by the perfidious "West" which uses this rhetoric to wage propaganda wars against its opponents.

Second, the nuclear proliferation is not a much concern to present-day Russia. It is not a welcomed development, to be sure, but Russian politicians do not excessively worry about this problem since they do not believe that nuclear proliferation presents a grave and immediate danger to their country's national interest. Unlike the US, they do not worry that nuclear weapons will be used by terrorist groups or rogue states against Russia proper or its allies. This approach dominates the Russian position at the six-party talks. While opposed to nuclear North Korea, Moscow is not ready to put too much pressure on Pyongyang, since such pressure might lead to internal problems and crisis within North Korea. Hence, Russian delegation puts an emphasis on negotiations, cooperation and soft approach.

The involvement with the six-party talks also gives Russia an opportunity to present itself as a potential facilitator in dealing with North Korean regime, often citing some special influence it allegedly has in Pyongyang. It seems doubtful if such influence actually exists: Russia is not a donor state, and its activities in North Korea are limited to much publicized symbolic actions.

However, one should not overestimate the significance of the "Korean question" in the Russian foreign policy. It remains marginal, since Russian political and economic interests in the region are limited. For Moscow, the major concerns are its relations with the US, Europe, China and, especially, with the ex-Soviet states. In those cases serious investments, vital strategic interests and, last but not least, painful questions of wounded national pride are often involved. But this is not the case with Korea.

This means that Russia—unlike China or South Korea, two major sponsors of Pyongyang—is not going to commit too large resources to North Korea. In other words, Russia would prefer to see status quo maintained in Korea, but it is not willing to spend too much resources towards such a goal. The aid statistics demonstrate it with remarkable clarity: so far, the Russian contribution to the aid to North Korea has been small, almost non-existent. Russia tries to be (or appear) friendly to Pyongyang,

but this support is largely limited to symbolic gestures, diplomatic statements, favourable publications in pro-government media and occasional visits of Russian artists to Pyongyang. In other words, Russian diplomats are ready to greet their North Korean counterparts with broad smiles, but are not willing to provide Pyongyang with much of material substance.

Such "cheap friendship" makes perfect sense for Moscow, since its resources are limited and there are areas where these resources are needed much more. Crisis in North Korea is not a desirable outcome, but it will damage Russian interests a lot less than, say, a crisis in Central Asia or the Caucasus. Pyongyang is also willing to maintain the fiction of "friendly relations" with Russia. Domestically, the regime needs to show the populace it still has some international allies. At the same time, Kim Jong Il is wary about the growing Chinese presence since it creates both reasons and opportunities for Beijing's interference with Pyongyang's domestic politics. Therefore the populace should not be induced to think too positively about China. Russia, which is unable and unwilling to interfere into North Korean domestic politics, seems to be an ideal choice of an "ally-for-propaganda."

As it has been said before, the economic interaction between the two countries is very limited. Nonetheless, there have been some speculations about alleged Russian economic interests in dealing with North Korea.

There are three major projects which have potential to generate revenues for Russia and are widely discussed. However, all these projects share the same common problem: the necessary investments are large while profits will not be reaped for a long time. The same capital, if invested to a more predictable and favourable environment, is likely to yield more. The uncertainty of the Korean politics aggravates situation further.

The first of these projects is the trans-Korean railway which should pass through North connecting South Korean and Russian railway networks. The talks about this project intensified in 2000, after the chain of summits between the leaders of North Korea, South Korea and Russia. From 2001 onwards Russian delegations frequent both Seoul and Pyongyang discussing the project which, they insist, will be highly profitable. Russian Vice Minister of Railways Alexander Tselko, while visiting Seoul in 2001, said: "So far, it costs $1,344 to send a 20-feet container from Pusan to Hamburg, Germany, via the Trans-China Railway (TCR). However, it only costs $889 from Khasan to Hamburg, thus saving about $400."[6]

[6] *Korea Times*, 12 February 2001. These figures have been repeated many times since then.

G.D.Tolaraya, a prominent Russian academic and senior diplomat, wrote about this project: "From the geopolitical point of view, such project is very efficient. It will give an opportunity to create a Euroasian land bridge, 'correct' the balance of Russian policy in East Asia where its relations with China and Japan are dominant, strengthen [Russia's] positions in Asia and decrease the tensions in a neighbouring region."[7]

All this sounds good, but a better look indicates that problems with the railway project are manifold. To start with, the North Korean leaders are not happy about letting South Korean cargo trains regularly pass the North Korean railway stations. Obviously, they are afraid that a sheer sight of these trains will tell North Korean populace about the size and sophistication of South Korean economy. Another political opposition to the project comes from the port city of Vladivostok whose authorities do not want to loose traffic to the proposed railway link.

However, the major problem is the large cost of the project. In order to make the project viable, one has to completely rebuild the North Korean railway network which is not only badly run, but based on the completely outdated technology from the 1950s, if not '40s. Some prospecting, recently undertaken by the Russian engineers, leaves no doubt that the North Korean railway cannot handle any increase in traffic without a thorough technical modernization. According to the current estimates, the reconstruction will cost at least 2.5 billion dollars.[8]

It is clear that the North Koreans are not willing to spend any money of this project (and the necessary funds are well beyond their capabilities, at any rate). Russians are not willing to do it either. The railway project might be economically viable, but, as Russian officials and businessmen privately told the present author a number of times, there are many other possible projects where similar investments are likely to produce greater profits, but without serious political risks. Russian private companies might take part in the railway reconstruction and even partially fund it—but only as long as it is largely supported by other major players, above all, by South Korea. Another possible solution is a decision by Russian government to partially bankroll the reconstruction, but at present it is difficult to see why the Russian government should even consider such a move.

Another much talked cooperation project is a pipe line which should connect

---

[7] Толорая Г.Д. Международные инфраструктурные проекты и позиции России в Восточной Азии (на примере Корейского полуострова). *KoRusForum*, March 2007. Retrieved at http://www.korusforum.org/PHP/STV.php?stid=14.

[8] *Stroitelnaia gazeta*, 19 January 2007; *Naeil sinimun*, 28 May 2007.

Russian gas fields and customers in South Korea, with possible involvement of North Koreans as subsidized consumers.[9] The problems are the same: large investments are necessary while both political stability of the region and eventual profitability of the project remain rather uncertain. Like the case of the railway project, Russian businesses might undertake something if backed by the government funds and/or guarantees, but this is not likely to happen in foreseeable future.

Perhaps, the most viable project is that of an electricity supply line. It might either be used as a part of complicated three-party agreements, or just pass through North Korea, supplying Russian-produced electricity to the South. Compared to the railway or pipeline, such a project is cheaper, but still costs money and will require a certain level of political stability in the area.

Perhaps, the ongoing trade in labour is the only truly successful joint economic project of two countries. The persistent labour shortages at the Russian Far East have always compelled the local administration to look for additional sources of labour elsewhere, so from the late 1960s a large number of North Korean loggers were sent to Russia. Nowadays, there might be 10-20 thousand North Korean workers who are employed by various companies in Russian Far East. This arrangement might be problematic in some regards, but generally it serves all three sides well: workers earn wages which are very good by the North Korean standards, the Pyongyang authorities pocket a large part of these wages, increasing their foreign currency revenues, and Russian small businesses get cheap and obedient labour force.[10]

Therefore, the current state of affairs can be described as following. Russia would prefer a stable and divided Korea, since it believes that unification might increase the geopolitical influence of its rivals and also likely to produce much instability in the area where Russian interests are especially vulnerable. However, these goals are not very high on the Russian foreign policy agenda at the moment, and Korean issue plays a secondary role in Moscow's policy. It means that Russia is unwilling to spend much on reaching desirable outcome (status quo being maintained), and believes it can live with other possible outcomes of the prolonged North Korean crisis.

---

[9] One of the early proposals of this kind, see: Selig S. Harrison. "Gas Pipelines and the North Korean Nuclear Crisis." *Foreign Service Journal*, December 2003.

[10] For more details on this arrangement and North Korean workers in Russia, see: Забровская Л.В, Корейская Народно-Демократическая Республика в эпоху глобализации: от затворничества к открытости, Владивосток: Тихоокеанский центр стратегических разработок, 2006.

Therefore, its support to North Korea is largely symbolic, and this likely to remain the case in foreseeable future, even if some moderate increase in the aid or other forms of activity seems to be possible. The large-scale cooperation projects, much talked about, are of limited economic viability and require tremendous investments, hence these projects will not be started any time soon, unless some outside donors will express their willingness to bankroll these activities at least partially. In short, in spite of all protestations to the contrary, Russia over last 15 years has been a rather passive observer of the Korean crisis, and this probably will not change any time soon.