

Russia's Interests and Objectives on the Korean Peninsula

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Introduction

The North Korean nuclear crisis that began in October 2002 has presented a challenge for Russia. The crisis began when a North Korean official allegedly acknowledged that his country had been pursuing a secret uranium enrichment program. Since then, Pyongyang has withdrawn from the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, expelled International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspectors, and restarted plutonium reactors whose operations were frozen under a 1994 agreement with the United States. North Korea has claimed that it has processed spent nuclear fuel rods and that it possesses nuclear weapons.

Russian policy makers want to play a role in resolving the North Korean nuclear crisis as a reflection of their country's great power status and because Russia has important interests in Northeast Asia that it wants to protect. As a country neighboring North Korea, Russia could be negatively affected by violent conflict on the peninsula or by a collapse of the North Korean regime. If the North Korean nuclear crisis is not successfully resolved and Pyongyang demonstrates that it has nuclear weapons, it could stimulate a new arms race in Northeast Asia with negative effects on Russia.

If the Korean nuclear crisis is not resolved peacefully, not only Russia's security interests but also its economic interests will be negatively affected. Conversely, Russia will benefit not only in the security sphere but also economically from a peaceful, negotiated resolution of the crisis that facilitates and provides some financial support for increased economic integration between the two Koreas and the Russian Far East.

This article analyzes Russia's interests and objectives and the policies it has pursued. It evaluates Moscow's success in achieving its objectives.

Russian interests and objectives

One important Russian objective has been to gain a seat at the table. Moscow is eager to participate in negotiations resolving the North Korean nuclear question in part for symbolic reasons, as recognition of Russia's great power status. From Moscow's perspective, Russia's position as a permanent member of the U.N. Security Council, its geographic location neighboring Korea, and its good relations with both Koreas all justify an important role.

Another significant Russian objective is to persuade North Korea to abandon its nuclear weapons program. If Pyongyang develops nuclear weapons, there will be a greater incentive for Japan and South Korea to do the same.

Russian officials are concerned that North Korea's withdrawal from the nuclear nonproliferation treaty will weaken the global regime against the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. This concern was expressed in December 2004 by Russia's Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov who expressed support for doing "everything in our power" to ensure that North Korea's nuclear program proceeds "in compliance with nonproliferation regimes."¹

Still another important Russian concern is to avoid a "hot war" on the Korean peninsula. In the event of a military conflict between the United States and North Korea, streams of North Korean refugees might reach the Russian Far East. Russia's security could be threatened by radioactive clouds from "Korean Chernobyls": nuclear power plants in North and South Korea destroyed in the fighting. Russia's and China's air defenses would be put on high alert to guard against even the low probability that weapons of mass destruction might be used in Korea.

A military conflict could have a devastating effect on the already difficult economic and demographic situation in the Russian Far East. It would end any hope for implementation of energy and transport projects intended to make an important contribution to this region's economic development. Military conflict or even a threat of military conflict could spark a further outflow of population from a region already experiencing a demographic crisis.²

Although there may be differences on this issue within the Russian foreign policy elite, Moscow supports transformation of the North Korean regime, not regime change. In the early Yeltsin period, "liberal democrats" in Moscow anticipated and even hoped for the early collapse of what they considered a vile regime in Pyongyang. Subsequently, the collapse of the North Korean regime did not appear to many Russian analysts as inevitable or as desirable as was first assumed.³

From the Russian perspective, the collapse of the North Korean regime could be a messy process with unpredictable consequences. One possible consequence would be the uncontrolled migration of "many tens of thousands of North Koreans to neighboring countries".⁴ According to Georgi Toloraya, a Russian Foreign Ministry official, "an overnight and forceful unification by absorption . . . would bring enormous suffering to the Korean people" with "enormously negative" humanitarian and economic consequences. Hasty reunification by absorption could spark "open or latent internal conflicts" and "hostility between the northern and southern peoples" that "would persist for generations".⁵

Toloraya warned that reunification by absorption could have a negative impact on Russia's strategic situation. Toloraya did not spell out precisely what he meant. One can guess what he may have meant by reading an analysis by Alexander Zhebin, a former Russian diplomat in Pyongyang, who appears to view relations with the United States from a cold war perspective. Zhebin has warned that a reunified Korea "under U.S. influence" would not be in Russia's interest. He argues that Washington is pushing for the collapse of the North Korean regime so the United States can bring their armed forces up to the Korean border with Russia and China. Deployment of U.S. forces "with their precision weaponry" along these borders would produce "cardinal changes in the military-political situation in this region." "In view of such plans," Zhebin argues, "Washington's appeals to Moscow and Beijing to take part in certain multilateral efforts with the ultimate aim of liquidating the DPRK look somewhat arrogant."⁶

Some Russian official and academic observers have denied media claims that there is a crisis within the North Korean regime.

Alexander Vorontsov, head of the Korean department in the Institute of Oriental Studies in Moscow, has refuted claims that North Korean leader Kim Jong-Il is in bad health and that his influence over national policy is declining. According to Vorontsov, Kim is supervising the implementation of a Military First Policy which envisages using the experience of strong regimes that have resolved difficult economic problems. In particular, Kim is "closely studying" the regime of Gen. Park Jung Hee, father of South Korea's economic miracle. Pyongyang's launching of a market-oriented reform and its increase in cooperation with South Korea reflect this new policy. Limits have been placed on the number of portraits of Kim in public places "to modernize the national image in keeping with international standards."⁷ Similarly, a "well-informed source" at the Russian embassy in North Korea said that portraits of Kim Jong-Il have been removed from some public places at the leadership's initiative.⁸

Another Russian concern is to avoid foreign access to naval bases in North Korea and to North Korean territorial waters. If North Korea were to come under "unfriendly control", it would pose a threat to Russian military and commercial sea routes to and from Vladivostok.⁹

To facilitate a long term, peaceful coexistence of the two Korean states, Russia supports reconciliation between North and South Korea. At his September 2004 Moscow summit with South Korean president Roh Moo Hyun, Russian President Vladimir Putin expressed support for "dialogue and rapprochement between the two Korean states."¹⁰

Moscow supports inter-Korean reconciliation to help create stability on the Korean peninsula and to establish favorable conditions for the implementation of trilateral energy and transport cooperation among Russia and North and South Korea. For several years, Putin has been touting a project to link the railroads between North and South Korea and to connect this new inter-Korean railroad to the Trans Siberian railroad. In a meeting with Russian Far East officials, Putin suggested that creation of this rail link was important so Russia could capture some of the Far East to Europe freight that otherwise would go to China.¹¹

Upgrading North Korea's railroad and connecting it to Russia would facilitate other potentially lucrative economic projects. Under consideration is a plan to ship Russian oil by rail to an idle refinery in Rajin, North Korea. From there, most of the oil would be shipped back to the Russian Far East that lacks adequate refinery facilities. Energy-starved North Korea would keep some of the oil as payment for use of its refinery.¹²

Besides the railroad project, several natural gas projects have been considered. One proposed project would bring natural gas from the Kovyktinskoe field in Irkutsk through China to the Korean peninsula. At one point, the Russian, Chinese and South Korean project participants discussed piping the gas from China through North Korea to South Korea. However, in November 2003 this route was rejected out of concern that it was not financially viable and that it would give North Korea too much control over gas flowing to South Korea. The project participants chose an alternative route from Irkutsk through China to Dalian and then under the Yellow Sea (West Sea) to Pyongtaek near Seoul.

Subsequently, implementation of the Kovykta project was delayed by the reorganization of Russia's energy sector that aims to give Gazprom and other firms close to the Putin regime more control. More recently, it was reported that the route through China has been rejected in favor of a route that will bring the gas from Irkutsk through the Russian Far East to Nakhodka. From there, the natural gas can be shipped to South Korea as LNG or, if the political situation permits, a pipeline from the Russian Far East through North Korea to South Korea may be considered.

The route to Nakhodka was chosen so that the gas pipeline would run parallel to a planned oil pipeline from East Siberian fields to the Pacific.¹³ The route to Nakhodka may not be the final choice. The Pacific terminus for the projected oil pipeline has been changed from Nakhodka to Perevoznaya Bay. However, this decision is being strongly criticized on environmental grounds. China still is trying to persuade Russia to send its East Siberian oil south to Daqing instead of to the Pacific. If Beijing succeeds, then it could undermine the rationale for building a gas pipeline parallel to the projected oil pipeline.

Another proposed project would pipe natural gas from Sakhalin through the Russian Far East and then on through North and South Korea. Still another prospective project would bring natural gas from the large field in the Sakha Republic (Yakutia) to the two Koreas. Also under consideration is construction of an electricity bridge from the Russian Far East to North Korea and ultimately South Korea.¹⁴

If a route through North Korea is chosen for any of these projects, it would benefit Russia economically and, at the same time, help resolve the nuclear crisis by enabling North Korea to meet some of its energy needs from sources other than nuclear power. Russia supports these prospective projects because they would contribute to the development of the Russian Far East and East Siberia, an important regime priority. If trilateral energy projects are subsidized as part of a resolution of the North Korean nuclear problem, North Korea could use part of the tariffs from railroads and pipelines traversing its territory to repay part of the massive U.S. \$7 billion Soviet-era debt.¹⁵

In an interview with Yonhap News Agency, the Russian ambassador to Seoul, Teymuraz Ramishvili, suggested that joint North Korean economic projects with South Korea and other countries may provide a better solution to the nuclear crisis than mere humanitarian aid. While he saw humanitarian aid as necessary, he argued it was not enough to persuade an extremely poor country to end its hostility. Ramishvili told Yonhap:

Anyone pushed to the wall is bound to be more aggressive. Economic development can at least partially change the system of North Korea.

Ramishvili lauded Seoul for pursuing a very successful North Korean policy, one that has resulted in less conflict between the two countries, less North Korean military provocation and increased bilateral exchanges.

The Russian ambassador suggested that it is time for South Korea to move onto the next stage and help North Korea stand on its own. He averred that it is better to spend money "on constructive projects than on more arms." He called for the pursuit of joint economic projects with North Korea in parallel with

negotiations on the nuclear development program. Without such projects, Ramishvili maintained, "North Korea will become more aggressive".¹⁶

Similarly, Deputy Russian Foreign Minister Alexander Saltanov, speaking at a reception at the North Korean embassy in Moscow, maintained that "inter-Korean cooperation and the implementation of economic bilateral and multilateral projects are designed to play an important role in stabilization in Korea." Saltanov perceived a real possibility of resolving the Korean peninsula's problems by peaceful means.¹⁷

At his September 2004 Moscow summit with Putin, South Korean President Roh expressed support for trilateral projects involving Russia and North and South Korea. Roh noted "a common vector in the policy of peace and prosperity that the South Korean government is pursuing in Northeast Asia and the Russian leadership's active development of the Far East and East Siberia."¹⁸

Another important Russian aim is to resolve the crisis in a way that does not harm its current good relations with North and South Korea. Many Russian observers believe that the early Yeltsin administration's one-sided pro-South Korean tilt badly damaged Russia's interests. This policy did not reap the economic benefits from South Korea that many Russians anticipated. At the same time, it badly strained Moscow's relations with Pyongyang, reducing Russian leverage in North Korea and decreasing Moscow's value to Seoul as an avenue for influence over the North. Russia's limited influence was highlighted by its exclusion from the process leading up to and implementing the 1994 Agreed Framework resolving the first North Korean nuclear crisis and from the four-party talks that began in 1996 among the United States, China and the two Koreas.

In the middle to late 1990s Moscow made a deliberate effort to repair its relations with North Korea while at the same time maintaining good ties with the South. This process was made easier by the 1994 death of North Korean president Kim Il-sung. Kim deeply resented Gorbachev's decision to establish diplomatic relations with South Korea and Yeltsin's pro-South Korean policy. The early 1996 replacement of the pro-Western Andrei Kozyrev by

Evgenii Primakov as Russian foreign minister facilitated this process. Primakov favored Russia's pursuit of a foreign policy more balanced between West and East. Another important incentive was NATO enlargement that increased Russian disillusionment with the West.

Economic considerations also were important. Only by improving relations with Pyongyang could Moscow hope to recoup North Korea's significant Soviet-era debt.¹⁹

The first steps to improve Russia's relations with North Korea were taken during Yeltsin's second presidential administration. A decision was made in Moscow to replace the 1961 Soviet-North Korean treaty, which Moscow had abrogated, with a new Russian-North Korean treaty.

Negotiations on the text of this new treaty were facilitated by a change in North Korean policy. In mid-1998, Pyongyang decided to improve relations with Moscow as a first step toward ending its diplomatic isolation. Agreement was reached on a new treaty that was initialed in 1999 when Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Karasin visited Pyongyang. Unlike the 1961 treaty, the new treaty required Russia only to consult with North Korea in the event of a crisis, not to render Pyongyang automatic support.²⁰ This new Treaty on Friendship, Good Neighborliness and Cooperation was signed in February 2000 by then Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov during a visit to Pyongyang.

Russia's reconciliation with North Korea was facilitated by Putin's accession to power. Putin has held three summits with Kim Jong-Il. Putin is the first Russian leader to visit North Korea. At the first summit, held in July 2000 in Pyongyang, Putin received an especially warm welcome. Signaling his interest in good relations with Russia, Kim Jong-Il arranged for one million cheering North Koreans to line the streets welcoming Putin. At this summit and at two subsequent meetings with Kim Jong-Il in Russia, Putin pressed for implementation of trilateral railroad and energy projects.²¹

At the regional level, cooperation is growing between North Korea and the Russian Far East. Since the Soviet period, North Korean workers have been involved in timber projects in the Russian Far East. More recently, they have been active in

construction and agriculture as well as in forestry. North Korean workers help to fill a labor shortage in a region experiencing a population outflow, particularly of working age inhabitants. Part of the labor of North Korean workers in the Russian Far East has been free in partial repayment of Pyongyang's large Soviet-era debt.

While pursuing better ties with North Korea, the Putin administration has not neglected relations with South Korea. Putin has held two summits with South Korean leaders, the first with President Kim Daejung in Seoul in February 2001 and the second, in September 2004, with President Roh in Moscow. The level of trade between Russia and South Korea, US \$6 billion in 2004, was many times the level of Russia's US 146 million bilateral trade with North Korea that same year. Apart from economics, South Korea and Russia are cooperating in the area of space and satellite technology and a number of other areas. Since 1996, Russia has been providing South Korea with arms as partial repayment for its Soviet-era debt. Regular meetings take place between the Russian and South Korean militaries and coast guards as well as civilian officials.

At the regional level, there has been an increase in cooperation between Seoul and the Russian Far East. South Korean companies have invested in or are considering investments in a hotel and international conference center in Vladivostok, a special economic zone near Nakhodka, and oil refineries in Tatarstan and in Khabarovsk.²² South Korea is importing oil and liquid natural gas (LNG) from Sakhalin. ROK companies have expressed an interest in increasing their energy imports from Sakhalin and in importing natural gas, oil and coal from other Russian regions.

While wanting to resolve the nuclear crisis in a way that preserves its current good relations with the two Koreas, Russia also wants to avoid harm to its ties with the United States. On this issue, one can detect significant differences of opinion in Russia. Since his accession to power, Putin has pursued a multidirectional foreign policy aimed at increasing Russian influence by improving relations with a wide variety of states. There are inherent problems and contradictions in a policy that aims simultaneously to court North Korea and other "rogue states" and to improve relations with Washington. Further confusing the matter is Putin's tendency to say

different things to different people, gearing his statements to what his audience wants to hear.

Putin himself seems to recognize the importance of maintaining good relations with the United States. His administration is trying to repair the damage to U.S.-Russian relations done by Moscow's opposition to the U.S. war in Iraq and to limit the potential damage from differences over the Iranian and North Korean nuclear programs.

This juggling act is not easy. It is complicated by the presence within the Putin administration of hard liners who are viscerally anti-Western. Outside the Putin administration, there are broad differences in attitudes toward the United States and toward U.S. policy in Northeast Asia.

One group of former officials and Korea specialists continues to view the U.S. presence and U.S. influence in Northeast Asia from what could be described as a cold war perspective. One proponent of this perspective is Zhebin who goes even farther than current Russian officials in blaming U.S. policy for the origins of the North Korean nuclear crisis. Zhebin presents a lengthy argument explaining how Washington's failure to fulfill the terms of the Agreed Framework induced North Korea to restart its nuclear reactors and to renounce participation in the nonproliferation regime. Zhebin argues that the U.S. deliberately provoked the crisis to prevent a *rapprochement* between North and South Korea. He claims that Washington does not want relations between Pyongyang and Seoul to improve because the U.S. needs the North Korean threat to justify its missile defense program so it can claim that it is not directed against China and Russia. Zhebin perceives Washington's ultimate aim as regime change in North Korea, not resolution of the nuclear crisis.²³

On the other side are Russian specialists who perceive that it is in their country's interests to create a "strategic alliance" with the United States and to support U.S. policy in Northeast Asia. Representative of this group is Sergei Karaganov and the Council on Foreign and Defense policy who, along with others, presented a "secret report" to the Putin administration on the eve of the Russian president's departure for the fall 2003 Camp David summit.²⁴

Russian specialists writing from this pro-U.S. perspective expressed support for President Bush's objective of modernizing failed states which they perceive as "political Chernobyls": sources of instability, terrorism, religious fundamentalism and drug trafficking. They believe that, given the threats facing the post-9-11 world, Russia should reevaluate its relations with North Korea and other countries considered to be "rogue states" and should not offer them protection.²⁵

Russian policy

Russia's policy during the most recent North Korean nuclear crisis has reflected its interests and objectives and at times these contradictory perspectives. Soon after the crisis began, Russian officials made clear their desire to play a prominent role in finding a resolution. In January 2003, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Aleksandr Losyukov visited Pyongyang and presented a package proposal to the North Korean leadership.²⁶

When trilateral talks were held in April 2003 among China, the United States and North Korea, Moscow expressed support for any format or process that would resolve the crisis. In private, however, the Russian foreign policy elite was disappointed that their country was not included in these talks.

When the first round of Six-Party Talks was convened in August 2003 and Russia was invited to participate at Pyongyang's insistence, there was rejoicing in Moscow. It has been suggested that growing tensions between Pyongyang and Beijing induced North Korea to insist on Russia's inclusion in multilateral talks.²⁷ Russia has participated in all the rounds of the Six-Party Talks held so far as well as in the working group meetings.

More recently, when North Korea caused a delay in convening the fourth round of Six-Party Talks, Moscow proposed convening a trilateral summit of Putin and the leaders of North and South Korea.²⁸ One possible venue for this summit was the May 2005 sixtieth anniversary celebrations of VE day held in Moscow. In the end, however, South Korean leader Roh decided to attend but Kim Jong-Il stayed home.

Russian officials have spoken out repeatedly for a peaceful,

negotiated resolution of the crisis. They have warned against the dangers of a military solution. They have rejected sanctions or other pressures as counterproductive. They have opposed referring the North Korean nuclear issue to the U.N. Security Council. Russian observers have warned that pressure is likely to backfire by backing Pyongyang into a corner and increasing its sense of insecurity.

Russian officials have touted the benefits of adopting a policy of reassurance toward North Korea rather than a policy of pressure. Moscow has proposed giving North Korea international security guarantees and economic assistance as part of a stage-by-stage package solution.²⁹ Moscow has volunteered to help provide North Korea with international security guarantees and energy assistance.³⁰

Russian observers recognize that their country's ability to meet North Korea's needs is limited. Russia lacks the financial resources to provide Pyongyang with sufficient financial aid.³¹ North Korea is not interested in Russian security guarantees.³² What North Korea really wants is the normalization of relations with the United States, U.S. security guarantees and economic assistance, in particular, access to funds from international financial institutions.

When the six-party negotiations have lagged, Moscow has urged North Korea and the United States to return to the table and to compromise. A common theme in Russian official commentary is the need for both sides to approach the nuclear issue with flexibility, patience and a willingness to compromise that takes into account North Korea's legitimate security interests and its right to normal, peaceful economic development.³³

Russian officials have spoken out when they believe that the United States is putting too much pressure on Pyongyang. In the summer and early fall of 2004, Deputy Foreign Minister Aleksandr Alekseyev, Russia's chief negotiator at the Six-Party Talks, suggested that it was unreasonable for Washington to set a three-month time frame for Pyongyang to commit to dismantling all its nuclear programs and to begin the process of dismantlement. According to Alekseyev, some progress was made at the third round of the Six-Party Talks, held in June 2004, but more than

three months was needed to work out the details of a package proposal and to overcome the severe mutual mistrust between Washington and Pyongyang.³⁴

Russian officials oppose efforts by other countries to put demands on the six-party negotiating table that may complicate efforts to resolve the nuclear crisis. In particular, Russian officials have opposed Tokyo's desire to put on the table the issue of Japanese citizens who were abducted to work in North Korea.³⁵

While supporting the reasonableness of North Korea's demand for security guarantees and economic assistance, Russian officials have made clear their strong interest in denuclearization of the Korean peninsula and in having North Korea return to the nuclear nonproliferation regime. The hard liner, Zhebin, noted that North Korea's decision to withdraw from the nuclear nonproliferation treaty "has aroused deep concern in Moscow." Zhebin argued that the positions of the U.S. and Russia on weapons of mass destruction (WMD) proliferation are "closer than they may seem." Moscow's view was expressed clearly at the June 2003 G-8 Evian summit where Putin pledged that Russian nuclear cooperation with all countries will be "based on how open they are and to what extent they are in a position to place their programs under IAEA control." Zhebin interpreted Putin's statement as a "clear message to Pyongyang that relations between Russia and the DPRK will henceforth depend more than ever before on North Korean behavior on the nuclear problem."³⁶

Here, though, there have been some clear differences between Moscow and Washington. The United States has insisted that North Korea renounce its civilian as well as its military nuclear program. From the perspective of the George W. Bush administration, so long as Pyongyang has any kind of nuclear program there is no guarantee that it will not be diverted to military use. Russian officials, on the other hand, have suggested that Pyongyang has the right to have a civilian nuclear program so long as it is put under International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) control.³⁷

Initially, Russian officials did not acknowledge that North Korea had a uranium enrichment as well as a plutonium program

although they did not explicitly deny it either. At the June 2004, G-8 summit in Sea Island, Georgia, Putin supported a statement claiming that North Korea had both plutonium reprocessing and uranium enrichment programs. The statement called on North Korea "to dismantle all of its nuclear weapons-related programs in a complete, verifiable, and irreversible manner."³⁸ On the eve of his departure for a November 2004 trip to South Korea, Konstantin Kosachev, chair of the Duma's International Affairs Committee, stated:

There are ample grounds now to believe that North Korea is actively engaged in developing technologies which can be used in the military nuclear sphere and possibly is preoccupied with enriching uranium, necessary for production of nuclear weapons.³⁹

Kosachev called on the two Koreas to pledge that they would not develop nuclear weapons.

A former Russian defense official, Viktor Yesin, previously chief of the Main Staff of Russia's Strategic Missile Troops, gives even more credence to U.S. claims that North Korea has a uranium enrichment weapons program. He cited the warning by Abdul Qadeer Khan, the father of Pakistan's nuclear bomb, that the North Korean uranium program is far more advanced than the world community realizes. Unlike North Korea's plutonium program, the uranium program has not been subject to IAEA controls. Yesin argues that it "may therefore be assumed that, under the cover of the plutonium weapons project . . . Pyongyang has been able to implement a uranium weapons project."⁴⁰

In May 2004, Russia joined the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI). The PSI is a group of countries that have pledged to share intelligence and to intercept the transit of missiles and materials usable for the manufacture of weapons of mass destruction. Previously, Russia had refused to join this initiative on the grounds that it encouraged states to act without U.N. Security Council sanction.

Russia's decision to join the PSI can be seen as a partial victory for Washington which had lobbied hard for Russian participation. However, the U.S. victory was not complete since Moscow placed

certain conditions upon its participation. In particular, the Russian Foreign Ministry proclaimed that it would implement the PSI "with consideration for the compatibility of the actions with the rules of international law, for their conformance to national legislation and for the commonality of nonproliferation interests with the partners." The Foreign Ministry also expressed its presumption "that activity under this initiative should not and will not create any obstacles to the lawful economic, scientific and technological cooperation of states."⁴¹ Russia was signaling that its joining the PSI would not stop its economic cooperation with states such as Iran and Syria.⁴²

There was a mixed Russian official reaction to Pyongyang's February 10, 2005 statement declaring that it has nuclear weapons and suspending its participation in the Six-Party Talks. Russian officials criticized Pyongyang's action, some more sharply than others. They urged North Korea to return to the talks and to resume its obligations under the nuclear nonproliferation treaty. At the same time, Russian officials encouraged other countries to eschew sanctions and to take North Korea's legitimate interests into account.⁴³

At the February 2005 Shanghai Cooperation Organization meeting in Astana, Kazakstan, Russia's Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and his Chinese counterpart Li Zhaoxing reaffirmed their support for a nuclear-free Korean peninsula and called for the early resumption of the Six-Party Talks. They urged all parties to the negotiations "to show self-control and actively search for compromises . . ." ⁴⁴ The Shanghai Cooperation Organization issued a joint communique calling for the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula.⁴⁵

Moscow has not officially recognized that North Korea has nuclear weapons nor has it denied Pyongyang's claim. When a Russian official proclaimed in a March 2005 interview that Pyongyang has "no possibilities to produce arms-grade (nuclear) charges," a spokesperson for the Russian embassy in Seoul said that this statement was only his personal opinion, not an official Russian government position.⁴⁶ More recently, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov proclaimed that Russia was checking thoroughly reports alleging that North Korea has several nuclear

warheads. After it has done so, it will be able to assess the possible threat it poses to Russian security.⁴⁷

Unofficially, some but by no means all, Russian analysts have expressed doubts about Pyongyang's claim to possess nuclear weapons. Major General Vladimir Belous, a leading researcher at the Institute of World Economy and International Relations in Moscow, called North Korea's claim a bluff designed to blackmail its partners in the Six-Party Talks. Since North Korea has not carried out any tests, Belous argued that Pyongyang's claim to possess nuclear weapons is doubtful. However, he acknowledged that the head of the Soviet KGB told the Politburo in 1990 that North Korea might have one or two nuclear warheads. Belous speculated that Korea might have technologies for making "immovable and untested nuclear bombs from plutonium."⁴⁸

Zhebin considers it more likely that Pyongyang has nuclear weapons. He notes that since North Korea cannot defend itself with its "obsolete conventional armaments," it has begun to develop missiles and "probably nuclear weapons" to deter a possible attack. Zhebin believes that the war in Iraq may have provided the final incentive for Pyongyang to produce nuclear weapons as a deterrent.⁴⁹

Yesin argues that it would be "rash to agree" with assessments by Russian and foreign experts that Pyongyang's February 10, 2005 claim to have nuclear weapons was just a bluff. While acknowledging that there "is little likelihood that the North Koreans have made nuclear weapons," Yesin argues that "such a scenario should not be ruled out." If Pyongyang does not have nuclear weapons now, it will have them soon unless the world community takes coordinated measures that take North Korea's security into account.

Yesin describes at some length the negative effects that North Korea's acquisition of nuclear weapons would have on crisis stability on the Korean peninsula and on the nuclear nonproliferation regime. He warns that if North Korea tests a nuclear weapon, it will provoke a new nuclear arms race. Tokyo will produce its own nuclear weapons, Japan, South Korea and Taiwan will increase their missile defense cooperation with the

United States, and Washington will take steps to defend U.S. territory and the territory of its allies to which China and Russia will be forced to react.

Yesin argues that Pyongyang is prepared to curtail its military nuclear program if Washington abandons its hostile policy. He describes three possible future scenarios. The first scenario, which he calls "Making Peace", is the one that he claims is preferred by North Korea. Yesin calls for the "unconditional dismantlement of all components of the DPRK's military nuclear program" in return for "guarantees of nonaggression, noninterference in its [North Korea's] internal affairs, and recognition of the DPRK on part of the United States." According to Yesin, realization of this scenario requires a political decision by the Bush administration that "in the event of its complete and verifiable repudiation of nuclear weapons (or of all types of weapons of mass destruction), the DPRK will not be viewed as a state whose existence is at variance with American interests."

While this first scenario is preferable, Yesin is not sure that the Bush administration is prepared to take this step. If it does not, then a second scenario becomes more likely: an increase in tension with the maintenance of a limited political dialogue.

Yesin argues that this second scenario will be fairly dangerous. It will allow North Korea to pursue military nuclear research without any international monitoring. Pyongyang is likely to resume ballistic missile testing and may even conduct a nuclear test. Washington will increase pressure on North Korea by "seeking its total political and economic isolation." Yesin believes that what he describes as the third scenario, the use of force by the United States, is less likely because North Korea is "fully prepared to undertake a preventive invasion of South Korea" if it feels threatened.⁵⁰

While Yesin advocates what he calls the "Making Peace" scenario, he does not discuss the verification problems that it would entail. Zhebin notes that verification would be a potential problem because the U.S. would have to search some eleven to twelve thousand North Korean underground sites. Pyongyang might not agree to such searches given Iraq's experience that "consent to inspections may not save the country from a US

attack."⁵¹

In an article written several years ago, Alexander Zarubin, a retired Russian military official, suggested a different reason Pyongyang might not agree to intrusive inspections of its nuclear facilities. Pyongyang has doubts about the reliability of its former allies and wants to be able to hold the South "hostage to Northern nuclear blackmail." Inspections may reveal that North Korea does not have a military nuclear program.⁵²

Conclusions and prospects

During the 1993-1994 crisis, Russia was excluded from the negotiations resolving the nuclear crisis and from the subsequent four-party talks. This time Russia has a seat at the table, symbolically reaffirming its great power ambitions.

Moscow has used its seat at the table to promote policies that reflect Russian interests and objectives. Russia has supported a peaceful, negotiated resolution of the crisis that puts an end to North Korea's nuclear weapons program and at the same time takes Pyongyang's interests into account by providing it with security assurances and economic aid, particularly in the energy sphere.

Moscow strongly opposes any resort to violence in Korea that could have a negative impact on the Russian Far East. Russian officials oppose sanctions or other pressure as counterproductive. They support a policy of reassurance and carrots rather than sticks. Moscow has opposed a policy of regime change that they perceive as unrealistic and potentially destabilizing.

There has been some evolution over time regarding precisely what Russia means by denuclearization. Initially, Moscow neither acknowledged nor denied the existence of a North Korean uranium enrichment program. Subsequently, Putin signed a G-8 summit statement calling on Pyongyang to dismantle all of its nuclear weapons programs. Moscow supports North Korea's right to keep a civilian nuclear program so long as it is under IAEA control.

So far, Russia has achieved many of its objectives. Resort to violence or sanctions have been avoided. Washington's policy

has evolved in what Russian officials consider a positive direction. U.S. officials do not appear to be pressing for regime change in Pyongyang. The Bush administration has modified its policy of demanding that North Korea carry out complete, verifiable, irreversible dismantlement of its nuclear program before it receives anything in exchange. Washington now is willing to consider a phased, step-by-step resolution of the crisis that gives Pyongyang some rewards along the way.

After suspending its participation in the Six-Party Talks for more than a year, Pyongyang returned to the table in late July 2005 for the fourth round in Beijing. North Korea has made some provocative statements including its February 10, 2005 claim that it has a nuclear weapons program. But Pyongyang has not resumed missile testing nor tested a nuclear weapon, steps that would have provoked a far more severe reaction.

If the worst scenarios from Russia's perspective have been avoided so far, this has occurred less because of Moscow's influence and more for other reasons. Moscow has not been alone in pressing the United States to modify its policy. Beijing, Seoul and to a more limited extent, Tokyo, have opposed the Bush administration's hard line position. Pyongyang has returned to the negotiating table because Washington has modified its position and because of incentives offered by other countries, mainly South Korea.

Russian analysts recognize that their ability to influence Pyongyang is limited. They acknowledge that Washington, Seoul, Beijing and even Tokyo are able to offer what North Korea wants: diplomatic recognition, security guarantees, aid, the end of economic sanctions, and access to funds from international financial institutions.

Russian observers acknowledge China's lead role in organizing the Six-Party Talks. They maintain that Russia has played a useful supporting role by serving as a channel for communication between the various parties, particularly Washington and Pyongyang.

So far Russia has avoided irreparable harm to its relations with either Washington or Pyongyang. Russia became a participant in

the Six-Party Talks at the instigation of Pyongyang that perceived Russia's policy as more sympathetic to its interests than even that of Beijing.

Russia has pursued a policy that is closer to the North Korean position than to that of the United States. Seemingly, Moscow has done so not just to assuage Pyongyang but because the dominant Russian analysis of the roots of the crisis and of the best way to deal with it is different from that of the Bush administration.

Even so, the damage to U.S.-Russian relations so far has been limited. Moscow largely has escaped U.S. criticism, even though its policy at times has appeared to be so sympathetic to Pyongyang that some Russian observers have accused their government of encouraging North Korean blackmail.

Russia has attracted far less U.S. criticism on the Korean nuclear crisis issue than China. Beijing has become the target of U.S. criticism not only because of its influential role in Korea but also because of mounting U.S. discontent with China's policies toward Taiwan, trade, the exchange rate, and other issues. In part to assuage the United States and in part because of its interest in counter proliferation, Moscow has joined the Proliferation Security Initiative and has taken other steps that China at least up until now has avoided.

So far, Russia's worst nightmares on the Korean peninsula have not been realized. Violent conflict and sanctions have been avoided. North Korea has not tested a nuclear weapon. Negotiations have resumed.

Unless and until the North Korean nuclear crisis is resolved successfully, Russia and other countries cannot rest assured that we will not see such negative developments will not occur. Successful resolution of the crisis will depend in part on whether Pyongyang is willing to give up its nuclear deterrent for the right price or whether it is determined to maintain a nuclear program or at least the illusion of having one.

If Pyongyang is not willing to dismantle its nuclear program and to allow intrusive inspections, there will be little that Russia or

any other country can do to ensure a successful outcome. If North Korea is willing to abandon its nuclear program, then a successful resolution will depend more on whether the Bush administration is willing to pay the necessary price than on anything decided in Moscow.

Endnotes:

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- ² Alexander Zhebin, "The Bush Doctrine, Russia and Korea," in *Confronting the Bush Doctrine: Critical Views from the Asia-Pacific*, ed. by Mel Gurtov and Peter Van Ness (New York: Routledge, 2005), pp. 148-49. Zhebin, a former Russian diplomat in Pyongyang, writes on Korean issues from a hard line or "cold war" perspective. On other aspects of the Korean issue, Zhebin's views may be more hard line than those of other Russian specialists. In this instance, Zhebin's call for a peaceful resolution of the crisis seems to reflect general Russian thinking.
- ³ Evgeniy P. Bazhanov, "Russian Views of the Agreed Framework and the Four-Party Talks," in *The North Korean Nuclear Program: Security, Strategy and New Perspectives from Russia*, ed. by James Clay Moltz and Alexandre Y. Mansourov (New York: Routledge, 2000), pp. 219-20.
- ⁴ Alexander Zarubin, "The Korean Peninsula: From Inter-Korean Confrontation to a System of Cooperative Security," in *Ibid.*, p. 215.
- ⁵ Georgi Toloraya, "Russia and North Korea: Ten Years Later," in *The Future of North Korea*, ed. by Tsuneo Akaha (New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 149.
- ⁶ Zhebin, op. cit., pp. 141-42. Not all members of the Russian foreign policy elite share this perspective.
- ⁷ Valery Agarkov, "Russian Expert Says Claims of Kim Jong-Il Weaker Influence Unfounded," *ITAR-TASS*, Dec. 14, 2004, in FBIS-SOV-2004-1214, Dec. 15, 2004. WNC Document Number 0i8rp17009rcnb. NewsEdge Document Number: 200412151477.1_982a000a95a9cf00.
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- ⁹ Nikolai Sokov, "A Russian View of the Future Korean Peninsula," in *The Future of North Korea*, ed. by Tsuneo Akaha (New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 135. Sokov, a former Soviet academic now in the United States, does not make it entirely clear why Russians believe foreign naval access to North Korean ports and territorial waters would significantly increase the "threat" posed by foreign naval access to South Korean ports and territorial waters.
- ¹⁰ "Russian President Supports Further Talks on N. Korea Nuclear Problem," *Interfax*, Sept. 22, 2004, in FBIS-SOV-2004-0921, Sept. 22, 2004, WNC Document Number, 0i4g2az03lmh60 NewsEdge Document Number, 200409221477.1_3dlc0007d6bc378a.
- ¹¹ See my "Russo-North Korean Relations under Kim Jong Il," in *North Korea: The Politics of Regime Survival*, ed. by Young Whan Kihl and Hong Nack Kim (M.E. Sharpe, 2005).
- ¹² Ki-Hyun Kim and Jin-Hup Song, "Russia Could Resume Crude Oil Shipments to North Korea," *Tong-A Ilbo*, March 24, 2005, in NewsEdge Document Number: 200503241477.1_fb0500385b6908e4.
- ¹³ Kim Ki-Hyon, "Details Materializing for Siberian Pipelines Through East Sea," *Tong-A Ilbo*, Aug. 6, 2004 in FBIS-EAS-2004-0806, Aug. 9, 2004. WNC Document Number: 0i26lj00lm5d60. NewsEdge Document Number: 200408091477.1_961100098786158b; Wohn Dong-hee and Hoh Kui-seek, "Plans for Siberian Gas Pipeline Will Not Include Korea, Aide Says," *JongAng Daily*, Nov. 27, 2004. Available at: http://service.joins.com/asp/print_article_english.asp?aid=2497778&esect code=e_eco&titl... Accessed 1/30/2005.
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- ¹⁵ This figure was cited by Konstantin Pulikovskiy, Putin's presidential envoy to the Russian Far East. ("Russian Envoy: North Korean Economic Reform Will Be Slow," *Interfax*, Aug. 18, 2005. NewsEdge Document Number 200508181477.1_eff50036d654406c.)
- ¹⁶ "ROK's Yonhap: Economic Projects Offer Solution to N.K. Standoff: Russian Envoy," *Yonhap*, Oct. 26, 2004 in FBIS-CHI-2004-1026, Oct. 27,

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- ¹⁷"Russian Minister: Settlement of Korean Nuclear Problem Through Six-Sided Talks Favored," *ITAR-TASS*, Feb. 7, 2005 in FBIS, Feb. 7, 2005, WNC Document Number None
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- ¹⁸"Russian President Supports Further Talks on N. Korea Nuclear Problem," *Interfax*, in FBIS-SOV-2004-0921, Sept. 22, 2004, WNC Document Number, 0i4g2az03lmh60
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- ²⁰Toloraya, op. cit., pp. 151-53.
- ²¹Toloraya, op. cit., pp. 154-55.
- ²²"Russia: Tatarstan, South Korea to Build Petrochemical Plant," *Itar-Tass*, Sept. 21, 2004, in FBIS-SOV-2004-0921, Sept. 22, 2004.
WNC Document Number: 0i4g2bh03tn4yr. NewsEdge Document Number, 200409221477.1_f2db00034d9f222e; "Russia: South Korea to Invest in Construction of Khabarovsk Oil Refinery," *Itar-Tass*, Sept. 21, 2004 in FBIS-CHI-2004-0921, Sept. 22, 2004, WNC Document Number: 0i4g2bh00b45wg. NewsEdge Document Number: 200409221477.1_ca9900024b47a720.
- ²³Zhebin, op. cit., pp. 138-39. Zhebin's argument is a bit contradictory. If Washington succeeds in bringing about regime change in Pyongyang then it no longer will be able to use the North Korean threat to justify missile defense.
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- ²⁵Zhebin, op. cit., pp. 132-33, 138.
- ²⁶Russian policy during the early phases of the crisis is discussed in much greater detail in my chapter in *North Korea: The Politics of Regime Survival*.
- ²⁷Zhebin, op. cit., pp. 143-44. According to Zhebin, not all Russians enthusiastically supported their country's participation in the six-party

- talks. Some were concerned that the U.S. might try to transform these talks into a tribunal for punishment of North Korea.
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- ³²Zhebin, op. cit., pp. 142-43.
- ³³"Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Says Impossible to Have Six Nation Talks in Sep," *Interfax*, Sept. 14, 2004, in FBIS-SOV-2004-0914, Sept. 15, 2004. WNC Document Number: 0i433ng00xuk3u
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- ³⁷"ROK's Yonhap: N. Korea Must Rejoin IAEA: Russian Envoy," *Yonhap*, Nov. 23, 2004 in FBIS-NES-2004-1123, Nov. 24, 2004. WNC Document

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- ⁴⁰"Russia: Ex-Missile Troops Aide Eyes Scenarios for Managing DPRK Nuclear Threat," *Nezavisimoye voyennoye obozreniye*, March 1, 2005. NewsEdge Document Number 200503011477.1_a834144f8dea74f3.
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- ⁴⁵"SCO Foreign Ministers Issue Joint Communique Calling for Nuclear-Free Peninsula," *Xinhua*, Feb. 25, 2005, NewsEdge Document Number, 200502251477.1_43c9003c5af23d91.
- ⁴⁶Pak So'ng-u (Park Song-wu)"Russian Embassy in ROK Rebuffs Moscow Official's Remark on DPRK Nuclear Capability," *The Korea Times*, March 13, 2005, NewsEdge Document Number

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- ⁵²Zarubin, op. cit., p. 215.