



Russian Policy Towards North Korea by Vasily Mikheev

Russia has revised its Korean policies. After Yevgeny Primakov and later Igor Ivanov became Russian Foreign Ministers and especially after President Vladimir Putin took power, Russia re-thought its policy, which, during Yeltsin's time, had been pro-South Korean. Russia decided to develop "parallel relationships," with both Seoul and Pyongyang that were as deep as possible, while recognizing the stronger South in terms of trade volume and the number of political contacts. Russia aimed to increase its role in Korean reconciliation by demonstrating its lingering influence in the North.

There are two reasons why Russia decided to re-think its Korean policy. First, Russia was dissatisfied with its relatively small economic cooperation with the South and concluded that it was not worth sacrificing contacts with the North. In addition, Russia was irritated that it was excluded from the Korean settlement process, which is being pursued through inter-Korean dialogue, North Korean - U.S. talks, and 4-way (U.S., China, DPRK, and ROK) talks. In re-constructing relations with the North, Russia saw a chance to increase its role on the peninsula.

Putin attempted to balance the two groups of the Russian political elite. One is pro-western and views the development of relations with an orthodox totalitarian North Korean regime as undermining Russia's democratic image. The other is more anti-western and believes Russia should strengthen ties with countries the U.S. has designated as "rogue states," including North Korea.

Two important events occurred in 2000, the February signing and July ratification of a new Russian-North Korean cooperation treaty that took the place of the 1961 treaty, and Putin's July visit to Pyongyang.

The new treaty was in both countries' favor. Unlike the 1961 treaty, this one does not include an article about military assistance in case of war. Russia is thus less obligated to North Korea than was the Soviet Union. North Korea, having signed the treaty, demonstrated to the U.S. and South Korea that it still has Russia's support. This gives Pyongyang more room for political maneuvering. Objectively, the treaty favored Northeast Asian political stability and was welcomed by most countries in the region.

Putin's visit to Pyongyang is much more complicated. The summit can be hardly estimated as a breakthrough in Russian-North Korean relations. The Russian Foreign Ministry decided to combine a visit to Pyongyang with Putin's visit to Beijing and to visit Seoul later. Putin's trips to China and North Korea were on the eve of the G-8 Summit in Okinawa in order to strengthen Putin's positions at the talks with the other world leaders. Putin used his China visit to

reinforce their mutual position against the U.S. plans to develop a national missile defense (NMD) system.

Putin used his North Korea visit both politically and psychologically. Politically, Putin tried to show the U.S. that he has influence upon Kim Jong-il, especially with respect to the cancellation of the missile production program. Psychologically, Putin tried to use the North Korea card, which had become very popular internationally after the June North-South summit. Russia feels itself a junior partner to G-7 countries in discussions of economic, financial, and technological issues. Putin needed leverage at his first G-8 meeting "to be equal to them." His visit to Pyongyang helped Putin reach this goal. Putin appeared to be the only G-8 leader who had met Kim Jong-il and became the focus of press attention at the Okinawa summit.

North Korea had its own agenda with Putin. The North has been changing its diplomatic tactics, however the goal of the North is the same - to provide security for Kim Jong-il's regime. Until the 1990s, the DPRK depended on economic and military assistance from the former Soviet Union and China. After the collapse of the Soviet Union and establishment of diplomatic relations between China and South Korea, the North used new tactics to provide for regime security: producing nuclear material and missiles and dialogue with the U.S. However, the dialogue could not compensate for the dramatically decreased economic aid from the former Soviet Union. The North Korean economy appeared to be on the verge of collapse by the year 2000. In response, the North decided to become a more active member of the international community, to attempt to normalize relations with the U.S., and improve relations with the South to get international economic aid and to prevent a military attack. North Korea became a member of the ASEAN Regional Forum, intensified its diplomacy in Europe and Asia, and hosted the inter-Korean summit. However, the North's main goal is the establishment of diplomatic relations with the U.S. In private talks with Russian counterparts, high-level North Korean diplomats used to say that "we will do everything, we are ready for everything to normalize relations with the U.S." North Korea also had two goals before the summit with Russia's president: to demonstrate its widening international contacts, and, psychologically, to help Kim feel firmer when meeting foreigners.

The results of the summit initially looked positive. Putin said, "as he understood, Kim is ready to cancel missile production if the international community helps the North to launch satellites," and successfully used this thesis to upgrade Russia's stakes at the G-8 Summit in Okinawa. Both sides also agreed to re-start the work of their bilateral economic commission and to cooperate in a number of bilateral and multilateral economic projects including opening of a railroad corridor which would link South Korea to North Korea

through the Russian trans-Siberian railroad. They also agreed to continue diplomatic consultations on peninsula and broader security issues and to re-start military exchanges.

However, it seems the results of the summit are less significant than originally perceived. At his recent meeting with South Korean journalists, Kim Jong-il said that he had mentioned the cancellation of the DPRK missile program “just in a passing, laughing matter” and that “Putin did not respond to it immediately but presented it in his own interpretation to the western leaders.” Russian democratic newspapers used this to criticize Putin’s diplomatic debut in Northeast Asia. Moscow, predictably, is irritated with Kim’s remarks. Real and wide-scale economic and military cooperation with the North is possible only on the basis of Russia’s economic aid to North Korea. However, Russia, under its current economic situation, is not able to help the North. So, the prospects of economic and military ties look very questionable. In the political sphere, it seems that the North succeeded more in playing its Russia card than Russia succeeded in playing a North Korea card. North Korea used Putin’s visit to accelerate normalization talks with the U.S. and to enter the ARF; Russia merely demonstrated its inability to understand real North Korean intentions regarding missile and security problems.

The fact that Kim Jong-il did not confirm Putin’s statement on the “missile production-for-satellite launching swap,” combined with the absence of a financial basis for Russian-North Korean economic and military cooperation make the future of Moscow-Pyongyang relations rather uncertain. Both sides will continue to play cards. The North will try to play a Russia card in dealing with the U.S. on normalization; Russia will try to play a North Korea card in dialogue with the U.S. on NMD. North Korea will also continue attempts to get Russian assistance where and when it is possible, while Russia will try to use economic cooperation with the North to strengthen Russian economic presence in Northeast Asia. However, it is not likely that both sides will succeed in re-establishing an atmosphere of sincerity and trustfulness. As one high-level North Korean diplomat said, “Russia remains an image of a betrayer in North Korean eyes because Russia, having stopped its aid to the North in the 90s, is responsible for the economic collapse in North Korea.” And, Putin is not likely to forget soon that Kim had so bluntly repudiated his statements about closing missile production in North Korea. The image of North Korea as a non-reliable partner has increased in the eyes of Russian politicians and intellectuals.

Kim is thinking about his visits to Moscow, as well as to Seoul. But it is not likely that the visit to Moscow will take place before the visit to Seoul. Neither is it likely that the Russian side will be glad to welcome the North Korean leader any time soon.

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