

Russia and the North Korean Knot

by Georgy Toloraya

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Reacting to the publication of the US Nuclear Posture Review, Pyongyang in mid-April 2010 officially confirmed its own position on nuclear weapons: "As long as the US nuclear threat persists, the DPRK will increase and update various type nuclear weapons as its deterrent in such a manner as it deems necessary in the days ahead." Along with others, Russia has to seriously question the viability of the two decades-old efforts for denuclearization of the neighboring country, with special accent on the relevance to the existing diplomatic framework. What is the purpose of the Six-Party Talks and what are Russian goals in this exercise? The need to determine real options on the Korean Peninsula is obvious. Russian strategy, coordinated through the Six-Party Talks, of making early denuclearization of North Korea a priority goal should be analyzed from the point of view of broader Russian interests vis-à-vis both the Korean Peninsula and global interaction with major partners, like the US, China, Japan, and the ROK.

At present the basic underlying approach, which more or less determines practical policy in Korea for Russia, can be summarized as follows. Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula is vital. Six-Party Talks are the most efficient way to accomplish that goal, and it is the crux of its agenda. Russia has no intention of recognizing North Korea as a nuclear state (although that does not change the fact that it possesses nuclear weapons). A 'diplomatic solution' -- giving North Korea incentives, first of all security guarantees to make it abandon nuclear weaponization -- should be sought, although there are few optimists who believe that would happen any time soon. Under no circumstances should military action or attempts to change the regime (effectively eliminating the North Korean state from the political map) be permissible. Sanctions do not help either. Only a compromise can lead to a breakthrough. Under that logic, maintaining amicable relations between Moscow and Pyongyang is imperative both for Russia's ability to prevent dangerous developments and to influence Pyongyang to be more receptive to compromise.

Such an approach suits well the core Russian strategy based on its national interests and in tune with the policies of its "strategic partner" China. It is also useful to contain potentially hostile Western ambitions in a vital area where Russian positions have never been strong enough. This accounts for Russia's seeming "passivity", which sometimes displeases the US. Deep in the heart of many Russian policy makers is the belief that the idea of a nuclear North Korea is less appalling than that of a destroyed North Korea.

Since 2009, Pyongyang's provocative behavior (above all its pursuit of nuclear and long-range missile capabilities) has almost overfilled the cup of the Kremlin's patience and given rise to a less lenient approach to the DPRK's adventurism. This new trend can be described as follows. Global interests, including the need to preserve the nonproliferation regime, in the framework of such an approach are more important than appeasing the whims of an abhorrent regime. The distant possibility of Japan, South Korea, or Taiwan aspiring for a nuclear capability is particularly worrisome. This would change the power equation not in Russia's favor and would require costly countermeasures. A reset of relations with the US, high on the Russian leadership's agenda, might prompt a sacrifice of good relations with Pyongyang for the sake of closer cooperation with Washington in vital security areas, especially in strategic arms limitation and counter-proliferation. Nor should Iran, where Russian interests are much deeper than in Korea, be forgotten. Maintaining a delicate balance around Tehran's nuclear program is more essential to Russian interests than keeping unruly Pyongyang out of trouble. Such an approach presupposes that effective measures against the potential implications of a North Korea with an established nuclear status might be necessary, including increased military preparedness in the Russian Far East, as well as a more supportive approach to international sanctions against North Korea.

Would Russia turn to a hard-line policy supportive of the US "sanctions first" approach in the quest for unconditional DPRK denuclearization? That would be strange, especially as a more comprehensive and forward-looking US approach is yet to be fully worked out. What would be the benefit for Russia of pressuring Pyongyang? Would that be likely to bring about a real change in North Korea's policies in nuclear-related matters? Regardless of Russia's actions, Pyongyang will not change its behavior unless US policies change. Since this is beyond Russia's control, Moscow feels no need to rush. The status quo, which is actually not deleterious to Russia's overall regional position, and can only be considered an indirect challenge to its global priorities, in my opinion, suits Russian interests.

The actual threat from the limited DPRK nuclear potential for Russia should be assessed. My opinion is that the actual use of a DPRK nuclear weapon (even if it were to prove to be operational) is highly improbable. The exception is all-out war, and this is deterred by the presence of nuclear potential in North Korea. An accident or turmoil in North Korea, resulting in loss of control over nuclear materials or a technical accident, are possible dangers. But these amount to reasons for Russia to prevent both kinds of developments and to prioritize them over denuclearization. Denuclearization of North Korea without a solid system of collective security in the region, could increase military risks.

What exactly denuclearization means is yet to be determined. A country cannot be fully deprived of the right to conduct nuclear research and to make peaceful use of nuclear energy. Apart from other considerations, that would contradict the principles of the NPT, which we are urging North Korea to follow. This is not to say that denuclearization (or at least the liquidation of the militarized nuclear component) is impossible or should not be aspired to, but it will certainly take a long time, and many conditions would have to be met, which would be difficult for both Pyongyang and other members of the Six-Party Talks to swallow. Narrowly put denuclearization might mean the disposal of the actual weapons, existing fissile materials, and their production facilities. But even in such a case human and scientific capital and expertise in things nuclear in North Korea would not disappear overnight, which leaves room for possible restart of such programs. The closed character of the country would prevent verification on a scale likely to be satisfactory to the world community. The conclusion that the country has really “denuclearized,” even on such a limited scale, cannot be reached under the current political regime. Even if parts of the elite were prepared to trade the nuclear potential for their personal future (which happened in South Africa) it would not be possible to verify this without a regime change.

What could really affect Russia’s interests is a further expansion of North Korean nuclear programs and improvement of their nuclear weapons and delivery systems (missile programs). That could endanger Russia's national security, mostly because of an increased regional response to these developments, which would require counter-measures. The possibility of North Korea’s WMD technologies falling into terrorist hands should not be totally discarded. Russia's interest in stopping any such development coincides with those of the US, Japan, and ROK. But, for Russia, denuclearization at all costs, without regard to broader security issues and consequences, should not become the overriding goal. Peace and security preservation are more important.

To achieve these goals, the multiparty negotiation process is essential, even though it would hardly bring immediate results. Should we analyze Russia’s approach to the diplomatic process from this point of view, it would become clear that the mistakes of the 1990s should not be repeated. At the time of early post-Soviet romanticism, the first democratic Russian government, determined to cooperate with the US (on matters including nonproliferation, one of the areas important to Washington) joined the effort to pressure Pyongyang, thinking the demise of the regime was not far off (although experts never agreed with that prognosis). As a result, Russia was sidelined from the Korean settlement process and found that decisions with direct bearing on Russian interests were being taken without it. These policies did not prevent the appearance of nuclear weapons at the Russian border either.

If denuclearization under the current rules of the game seems unattainable, why should Russia put it ahead of other goals, namely, the goal of stability in Korea? A collapse of the North Korean state, involving de facto occupation by South Korea, is not how Russia would like to see the future. I will not speculate on the possible long-term destabilization of Russia's neighborhood that could follow internal strife in the

North except to note that it might include armed opposition or the inability of North Korean population -- “second class” citizens in a unified Korea -- to adapt to the new rules.

Another possibility is “soft” regime change with Chinese involvement. That might range from Beijing sending troops to control the disintegrating country or parts of it (in accordance with a February 1958 Kim Il Sung-Chou En-lai Joint statement) to the installation of a pro-Chinese faction in power. Such a scenario would also mean an increase in regional tensions (contradictions between China and South Korea, the latter supported by the US) and a possible arms race, which would certainly follow from what would be perceived in Asia as a new Beijing hegemonism. Under any of these scenarios Russia will lose. It would probably also be totally devoid of leverage and ability to influence the development of the situation or the post-change leadership.

For Russia the more viable option is trying to rein in the DPRK nuclear potential -- to “manage the risks”, silently agreeing to the temporary preservation of the current, limited potential. The condition for that is responsible DPRK behavior: no new tests, or, God forbid, international proliferation, no new development of nuclear or missile technology. This is feasible and can be achieved through the diplomatic process, although the goal of actual denuclearization would move “over the horizon.”

I have long advocated the view that this would only occur in a distant future, when a new generation leadership has emerged and relations between the DPRK and the world have improved based on the country’s own transformation. Then, the need for a “nuclear deterrent” for Pyongyang would probably disappear.

In the meantime, however, for this to happen, the world's only existing partner in maintaining the status quo is the current North Korean elite. They need guarantees and Russia should not ignore the importance of their concerns. There is no alternative to communication with them. Pyongyang’s aims are to remove military-political threats to the regime, achieve security arrangements, prevent foreign interference, and obtain economic assistance. The mechanism to discuss these concerns exists. It is again the Six-Party Talks. But the talks should not concentrate exclusively on the nuclear issue. They should deal with comprehensive security problems, dating back several decades. Denuclearization is only one track of these talks, and actually it is even a secondary one.

As the member of the talks with the least “egoistic” interests and responsibility to manage the issues of the mechanism of peace and security in North East Asia, Russia should put forward such an agenda. Any attempts to ignore Russian interests and role in the multiparty diplomatic process would be unacceptable. I believe Russia should be on guard against possible attempts to discuss the security preservation issues without her participation.

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