

The Bipolarity Paradox: A Preliminary Assessment of the Implications of the Strengthening China-Russia “Quasi-Alliance” for the Korean Peninsula

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Structured Abstract

Article Type: Research Article

Purpose: Scholars have been debating the geopolitical importance of the strengthening China-Russia relationship for some time, noting that the relationship does not constitute a full alliance, but still might have great significance for world politics. This paper aims to improve on this scholarship by examining the evolution of China-Russia cooperation as it relates to the future of North Korea, especially in the wake of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.

Design, Methodology, Approach: This scholarship represents a methodological advance over most previous discussions of the China-Russia relationship. It embraces the historical development of this relationship, probes structural arrangements in relationship to regional stability, and also draws upon extensive Russian and Chinese language data sets which constitute the material for a “discourse analysis,” to achieve a deeper understanding of this relationship as it pertains to the Korean Peninsula.

Findings: Overall, this study documents substantial cooperation between Beijing and Moscow with respect to Korean affairs. While some disagreements between China and Russia do exist in this sphere, the main implication of these developments is the trend toward a hardening of the bipolar structure in Northeast Asia, informed by the growing influence of patriotic and nationalistic elite groups within both China and Russia. However, the study

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points out a paradox in that this hardening of bipolarity could actually help to stabilize the spiraling tensions that have surrounded North Korea in recent decades.

Practical Implications: This paper may help students and policymakers alike in Northeast Asia evaluate the significance of the China-Russia quasi-alliance. Overall, this paper supports the conclusion that the dangers of the China-Russia quasi-alliance need not be exaggerated.

Originality Value: This paper is innovative insofar as it gives balanced attention to both China's and Russia's discourses and policies toward North Korea and evaluates the influence of Moscow-Beijing's growing cooperation in the context of the Russia-Ukraine war, as it may impact the future of North Korea and the wider region.

Key Words: China-Russia strategic cooperation, North Korean nuclear crisis, the Ukraine War and East Asian security, US-South Korea alliance

I. Introduction

During July 2019, air force bombers from Russia and China linked up over the Sea of Japan and undertook a first ever joint strategic aviation patrol. After scrambling an altogether outsized fighter interceptor force to meet the visiting bombers, South Korean aircraft actually fired warning shots and flares, prompting a Russian general to complain of “aerial hooliganism.”¹ In a somewhat similar first, a joint flotilla of ten Chinese and Russian warships brazenly sortied through the narrow Tsugaru Strait separating the Japanese main islands of Honshu and Hokkaido in October 2021. Such joint maneuvers by the erstwhile China-Russia quasi-alliance raised tensions even as the Northeast Asia region had been trying to recover from both the Covid-19 pandemic and the dangerous North Korea nuclear showdown that preceded it.

Now, a new crisis is sweeping over the region, and this must be viewed as a major reverberation of the violent catastrophe that has enveloped Eastern Europe since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. A major impact of the Ukraine War appears to be the further consolidation of alliance structures in the Asia-Pacific region, including between the US, Japan, and South Korea. At the same time, North Korea has resumed a rapid pace of missile development and Pyongyang has also countered by overtly reaching out to energize its old friendship with Moscow. September 2023 witnessed an extraordinary summit between the North Korean and Russian leaders and, shortly thereafter, North Korean weapons and munitions have started to flow into Russia in significant quantities. Meanwhile, the China-Russia relationship has also consolidated further. Indeed, June 2023 witnessed the fifth joint strategic aviation exercise linking Chinese and Russian air forces in a sortie that “entered the southern and eastern parts of the Korean Air Defense Identification Zone (KADIZ).”² Taken together, these ominous developments seem to imply the solidification of a bipolar structure somewhat reminiscent of the 1950s.³

This paper will examine the impact of closer coordination between China and Russia for the Korean Peninsula, and with respect to North Korea policies, in particular.⁴ This analysis is drawn from the acknowledgment that the nature of the current Russo-Chinese strategic partnership could be characterized as a “quasi-alliance,” which is interpreted in the literature as “a national interest-driven close alignment in worldviews and general foreign policy goals leading to ... consultations and close coordination of practical policies, with

no automatic commitments.”⁵ We concur with some existing assessment of Russian-Chinese relations as a partnership with “strong institutional foundations for an alliance,”⁶ but with some limitations which determined China’s policy of distancing itself from Moscow’s invasion of Ukraine,⁷ and specific strategies to secure a country’s role in a concert-like management of international relations, which also fit the characteristics of quasi-alliance, or “entente.”⁸ Methodologically, this analysis relies on the numerous studies in the literature which justify the generally positive role of a bipolar international order for power balancing and international stability.⁹ To examine Russia’s and China’s specific perspective on North Korea, the elements of discourse analysis seem to be helpful for determining the role of prominent experts in the formation of an official policy course in China and Russia toward North Korea.¹⁰ One of the authors of this piece specifically examined the evolution of the Chinese position toward the North Korea nuclear crisis and the situation on the Korean Peninsula, especially during the U.S.–North Korea crisis in 2017.¹¹ As the situation on the peninsula deteriorated, Chinese experts presented polar views on the relations between Beijing and Pyongyang ranging from favoring North Korea to cutting ties with this traditional Chinese ally, due to Pyongyang’s provocative behavior. Some scholars (such as Chu Shulong, Shen Zhihua) have advocated for severing ties with North Korea and putting emphasis on the sanctions regime including China’s unilateral sanctions. Other scholars, including China’s prominent strategic thinkers Yan Xuetong, Wang Xiaobo, and Dai Xu, had been consistent in opposing sanctions against North Korea and in considering China and Russia’s nuclear umbrellas for Pyongyang, in exchange for denuclearization. The majority of Chinese scholars presented the widespread view that in solving the North Korea nuclear issue, all interested parties should prioritize stability first, then denuclearization second. Some Chinese experts stressed the role of China and Russia in seeking ways to preserve stability on the Korean Peninsula. The Russian scholars have also been divided between the “liberals” (Georgy Kunadze, Sergey Lukonin, and Vassily Mikheev, who called for strengthening the South Korean vector and considered cooperation with the DPRK undesirable, and Pyongyang incapable of negotiating), skeptics (analysts from the Institute of World Economics and International Relations [IMEMO] who sought negotiations on the Korean Peninsula crisis without inviting North Korea), and “pragmatists” who advocated for an equidistant and interest-based approach (Georgy Toloraya, Marina Kukla, Alexander Zhebin, Alexander Matzegora).¹²

The investigation unfolds in five steps: first the crucial historical background of Russia-China interaction on the Korean Peninsula is expanded upon. That is followed by a look at how this relationship has developed in the era of Kim Jong-un. The third and fourth sections evaluate the results of the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine for China-Russia policies impacting Korea. The fifth section lays out a number of related policy recommendations. While the situation continues to develop in troubling ways, a preliminary but somewhat counterintuitive conclusion is reached in this analysis: that given the nature of a Russo-Chinese “quasi-alliance,” the West should capitalize on the ability of China and Russia to secure coordinated effort on the Korean Peninsula without being endangered by a much more robust alignment between China, Russia, and North Korea. Moreover, a consolidating Russia-China partnership in Northeast Asia enhanced by the Ukraine crisis could help to eventually stabilize the volatile Korean situation.

II. Historical Background of China-Russia Interaction on the Korean Peninsula

China-Russia interaction has a long history that goes back to their common dread of the Mongols,¹³ but in modern history, the two countries had experienced some periods of confrontation and both developed complex relationships with Japan.¹⁴ The Chinese kingdoms developed tributary relationships with their Korean counterparts during the Korean Three Kingdoms (1st century BC–7th century AD). China aided Korean armies against Toyotomi Hideyoshi's invading samurai during the Imijin War (1592–98).¹⁵ In this war, the Ming fleet helped Korea's famous turtle boats drive off the Japanese. For the next three centuries, Korea existed as a tributary state of the Middle Kingdom, but a newly dynamic Japan, following the Meiji reforms, ended that arrangement by trouncing China during the Sino-Japanese War of 1894–95.

While Russian explorers had reached the Pacific Ocean as early as 1639, it took centuries for successive Tsars to consolidate Russia's hold over Siberia—a process that certainly benefited from China's rapid decline in the 19th century. A window into the Russian perspective on Korea is provided by a new account of the Russian frigate *Pallada* in East Asian waters during 1854: "...although Korea observes rituals connected to its nominal status as China's vassal, it effectively operates as an independent state. Previous incidents [make us] confident that the Qing government would not lift a finger to defend Korea ..."¹⁶ In 1896–97 the Korean King Gojong stayed at the Russian legation,¹⁷ and Russian diplomats were heavily involved in the situation around Korea.¹⁸ After Japan was denied the Liaodong Peninsula in the Triple Intervention, Japan was further perturbed by Russia's revolutionary Trans-Siberian Railway.

The short, bloody Russo-Japanese War (1904–05) witnessed Russia's utter humiliation. However, Japanese ambitions in Northeast Asia went well beyond Korea, of course, reaching deep into Siberia during the Russian Civil War and eventually carving out the puppet state of Manchukuo.¹⁹ China remained rather prostrate under Chiang Kai-shek, but Tokyo's march into Northeast Asia was decisively halted by the Soviets at Nomonhan (Mongolia) in 1939.

After World War II, Soviet leader Joseph Stalin sought to preserve and expand Soviet gains in Northeast Asia. Historian John Lewis Gaddis notes that the Soviet dictator was brazen enough to ask for Soviet occupation of Hokkaido at the Potsdam Conference, after obtaining related assurances at Yalta.²⁰ With a haunting echo of current Kremlin decision-making in Ukraine, one expert observes: "Directly contiguous to the important Soviet naval center at Vladivostok.... North Korea was a region that had to be denied to a potential adversary."²¹ It was Kim Il-sung himself who pushed most forcefully for unification by force, but he had gained the support of both Stalin and also Mao.²² China could not have fought the US to a stalemate in that conflict without very ample Soviet military assistance. It is increasingly common of late for Russians and Chinese to sentimentalize regarding this "Golden Age" in the relationship. North Korea had been reduced to rubble during the war by a US air campaign in which America dropped more bombs than they had in the entire Second World War, so "China and the Soviet Union ... worked hard to rebuild the country. The North benefited immensely from this."²³

This "Golden Age" of the Sino-Soviet alliance came to a swift end at the end of the 1950s and Pyongyang's nuclear ambitions are largely an artifact of this tussle among the

Eurasian giants. In addition, the ideological crisis among the two communist giants in the 1960s prompted the Kim regime to develop North Korea's own version of socialism, much more totalitarian and based on nationalist ideals.²⁴ Amidst the confrontation in the communist "camp," Pyongyang had to balance between Moscow and Beijing, signing treaties of friendship with both which included mutual defense clauses.²⁵ Jonathan Pollack's authoritative account of the North Korean nuclear program explains that the Yongbyon reactor was built with Soviet technical assistance and went critical in 1965. This author asks: "...did the Russians fear that North Korea would turn to China if Moscow failed to provide meaningful assistance to Pyongyang? ... Khrushchev probably hoped to pull Kim more firmly into the Soviet camp."²⁶

A recent Chinese account suggests that the leadership in Beijing and Pyongyang were similarly inclined to disparage Khrushchev's critique of Stalin's rule.²⁷ Even so, over the course of several years, Kim came to see Mao's Cultural Revolution as "mass lunacy" that endangered North Korea.²⁸ By the end of the decade, Kim had signed new agreements with the USSR and had plans to completely upgrade DPRK military systems with Soviet hardware. The Moscow-Pyongyang relationship, however, was not entirely stable at this time. A Russian assessment of this period recognizes that the January 1968 seizure of the USS *Pueblo* by North Korean forces brought "our country [the USSR] to the brink of nuclear war" with the United States.²⁹ Pollack explains: "Brezhnev had become far warier of close alliance ties to the North in light of the DPRK's risk-taking.... Senior Soviet officials had repeatedly deferred consideration of major new aid requests from Pyongyang, including Kim's renewed push for nuclear reactors."³⁰

As China transitioned to the leadership of Deng Xiaoping, the October 1983 bombing by North Korea of a South Korean delegation in Burma became a severe breaking point in the PRC-DPRK relationship.³¹ The September Soviet shootdown of the South Korean airliner near Sakhalin Island, meant that the Cold War in the Asia-Pacific region was intensifying yet again. Firmly now in the Soviet orbit (against the China-US alignment), the new Soviet leader Konstantin Chernenko acceded to Kim's pleading on transferring the nuclear reactor. His successor, Mikhail Gorbachev, allowed the nuclear reactor transfer, but only after Pyongyang had signed a Non-Proliferation Treaty in December 1985.³² Yet, powerful winds of reform were blowing. Between 1985 and 1991, Soviet trade with South Korea increased by more than 20 times.³³

The collapse of the USSR in 1991 set off massive reverberations across the entire world, including on the Korean Peninsula. Both Beijing and Moscow moved quite quickly to establish diplomatic relations with South Korea. Seoul's formal diplomatic relations with Beijing date from August 1992, and with Russia diplomatic relations officially began on September 30, 1990. The consequences proved severe for North Korea. As one contemporary Chinese account relates, Moscow at that time pursued a foreign policy of "kissing the West [亲西方]," and the related marketization drive meant the end of Moscow's subsidies to Pyongyang and its demand for hard currency to trade.³⁴ This amounted to "a grave attack against the North Korean economy."³⁵

In such circumstances, ebullient optimism surrounding the end of the Cold War quickly yielded to a full-blown military-political crisis during 1994, as Washington weighed military options on the Korean Peninsula for the first time in decades to prevent the DPRK from cheating on its nuclear commitments. Former President Jimmy Carter flew to Pyongyang to

negotiate the so-called Agreed Framework with Kim Il-sung in June 1994. That agreement seemed to restrain inter-Korean tensions, at least for a while, despite occasional flareups including a major naval skirmish in September 1996 and Pyongyang's firing of a multi-stage rocket over Japan in mid-1998. Still, the winds of peace swept over the Peninsula with the first ever Inter-Korean Summit in June 2000, for which South Korean leader Kim Dae-jung won the Nobel Peace Prize. In a somewhat remarkable gesture a month later, the new President of Russia Vladimir Putin, in office for just a couple of months, flew into Pyongyang. According to one recent examination of Russia's policy toward Korea, this was actually an attempt by Putin to try to salvage the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty.³⁶ Visits by US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright in October 2000 and then by Chinese President Jiang Zemin in 2001 completed this flurry of diplomacy.

Unfortunately, the 9/11 attacks against the US had rather grave implications for the Korean Peninsula, especially since the Bush Administration opted to identify North Korea as part of an "Axis of Evil" that also included Iran and Iraq. Chinese analyses suggest that before the US launched the Iraq War, North Korean nuclear plans intensified. Pyongyang gave formal notice that it would withdraw from the NPT in January 2003. Chinese President Hu Jintao did visit North Korea in 2005, the last such visit by a Chinese head of state for many years. In October 2006, Pyongyang tested its first nuclear weapon. According to one influential US official's account: "There was no country more outraged by the nuclear test than China."³⁷ Indeed, major fractures seemed to intensify between Beijing and Pyongyang, but the alleged North Korean sinking in March 2010 of the ROK corvette *Cheonan* badly divided China, from both South Korea and the US as well. Spiking tensions on the Korean Peninsula formed the major backdrop for Washington's "pivot to Asia." One may surmise that Moscow and Beijing were already coordinating policy closely during the 2010 crisis. As leading Russian sinologist Alexander Lukin concluded: "Thanks to the successful efforts of Russia and China, the Korean sides were brought back from the brink."³⁸

III. Russia-China Orientation in the Era of Kim Jong-un

Notably during this extremely tense time, Pyongyang reached out to Moscow and Kim Jong-il made a visit to the Russian Far East in August 2011.³⁹ Less than six months later, the second leader of North Korea, who had actually been born near Khabarovsk in Russia,⁴⁰ died leaving his "Hermit Kingdom" to his designated heir Kim Jong-un. As Jung Pak observes, Kim Jong-un lacks "any sense of affinity with Beijing and Moscow, which had figured so prominently in the consciousnesses of his grandfather and his father."⁴¹

Moscow continued making overtures to the new North Korean leader. As one expert in Moscow explained in September 2012, when the Kremlin announced an agreement to write off 90% of North Korea's debt to Russia: "It's also a sign of political will from Russia."⁴² With respect to Beijing, however, Kim Jong-un's emergence put additional strain on an already difficult relationship. China had been deeply shocked and embarrassed by the 2006 nuclear test. Shielding Pyongyang from widespread international opprobrium in the wake of the *Cheonan* incident hardly enamored Chinese leaders to the regime in Pyongyang.

The North Korean missile test in April 2012, and then in February 2013 infuriated both

China and Russia. Moscow supported UNSC Resolution 2094 adopted on March 2013, but Russia also increased its food supplies to North Korea.⁴³ Over the course of 2013, Pyongyang's relations with Beijing soured even further. A shockingly direct editorial after the early February nuclear test in the Chinese newspaper *Global Times* did not mince words: "[T]here could even arise [in China–North Korean relations] a break similar to that of China and the Soviet Union [back in the 1960s]."⁴⁴ Notably, China's foreign policy elite hardly appreciated that the new crisis on the Korean Peninsula seemed to overshadow Xi Jinping's accession to power in Beijing during spring 2013. The execution of Kim Jong-un's uncle, Jang Song-thaek, in December 2013 signaled that Pyongyang was willing to further challenge Beijing's approach.

But Moscow was not in accord with Beijing's more hardline approach to Pyongyang. In a hint of what would occur after 2022, the Russia–North Korea relationship witnessed dramatic improvement during 2014 in what Alexander Vorontsov termed "a sort of renaissance," which included high level visits and new trade agreements.⁴⁵ By the end of that watershed year, Putin had even proffered an invitation to Kim Jong-un to visit Moscow.⁴⁶ That visit did not materialize, most likely due to Chinese objections. Still, numerous trade delegations traveled between the two countries and in mid-2014 the "universal freight terminal" went into operation at the North Korean Port of Rajin.⁴⁷

Chinese observers were generally encouraging greater Russian attention to the Korea issue. For instance, one Chinese analysis assessed in late 2014: "China wants to see North Korea break out of ... isolation, so if Russia and North Korea improve economic ties, this will lighten the long-time burden on China."⁴⁸ Indeed, Beijing seemed to be rethinking its rather confrontational approach from 2013. In October 2014, therefore, a long and flattering article about Kim Jong-un graced the cover page of *Global Times*.⁴⁹ As an illustration of the increasing momentum in the Russia-China quasi-alliance after 2014 and also the related coalescing of Chinese and Russian viewpoints on North Korea, Beijing and Moscow initiated a "regular vice-ministerial dialogue on security in Northeast Asia centered on Korean issues, with meetings normally conducted twice a year."⁵⁰

Russian analyses of Korea from this period reflect a growing tendency to sympathize with the Chinese perspective. For instance, Georgy Toloraya, one of Russia's top North Korea experts, assessed in early 2016: "...the threat from Pyongyang allows Washington to 'rein in' its allies in the Asia-Pacific region—Japan and South Korea, to maintain and build here large formations and serious military offensive potential aimed at the realization of a long-term strategic goal—to contain China."⁵¹ In Beijing, meanwhile, a rather extraordinary article appeared against a confrontational approach to the DPRK: "...China still needs to promote the strategic balance of power in this region through developing political relations with North Korea." The author also comments on the Russian factor, observing, "Although Russia has been actively developing its ties with North Korea, its influence is limited. ... China cannot avoid recognizing [its] responsibility."⁵²

During Trump's first year in office in 2017, North Korea tested 23 different ballistic missiles, including a salvo launch in March and a successful ICBM test on July 4.⁵³ Prior to this, North Korea conducted a hydrogen bomb test on January 6, 2016,⁵⁴ which angered Beijing and Moscow, but Russia took a balanced position in the preparation of UNSC Resolution 2375 (September 11, 2017) on the test of a hydrogen bomb.⁵⁵ With tensions growing, some Chinese experts expressed concerns that the US-ROK alliance could be entertaining plans

for a preemptive strike. Other Chinese specialists decried “pressure tactics against China to deal with the North Korea crisis” and asserted that if the US–Japan–South Korea alliance morphs into an anti–China/Russia [bloc], then “China and Russia will also strengthen countermeasures.”⁵⁶

In Beijing, the gulf between the “abandon North Korea faction” and the “protect North Korea” faction appeared as wide as ever. Thus, at Tsinghua University, one leading scholar argued “tolerating amounts to abetting,” and advocated for stronger sanctions. By contrast, another leading Tsinghua scholar said that sanctions would only ensure that China and North Korea become adversaries.⁵⁷

In 2017, one prominent China expert Alexander Gabuev pointed to Russia’s enhanced opportunity to “defend North Korea” due to China’s potential costs of moving closer to Pyongyang at the time of bargaining with the US over bilateral trade.⁵⁸ Challenging the US strategy of “maximum pressure,” Putin stated in September 2017 that UN sanctions would not work, because the North Koreans “would rather eat grass” than give up their nuclear arsenal. Putin was speaking at the Eastern Economic Forum in Vladivostok, and the guests included not only Prime Minister Shinzo Abe of Japan, but also the newly elected Moon Jae-in of South Korea. Despite Putin’s skepticism, the Kremlin nevertheless went along with a raft of new UN sanctions in December 2017. A leading Russian security expert explains: “Chinese lobbying was the most important reason for Moscow’s decision to go along with the UN Security Council vote penalizing North Korea.”⁵⁹

After a year of grave tensions, the clouds of war dissipated over the course of 2018–19. President Trump undertook three meetings, including two summits, with Kim Jong-un. But focusing here on Beijing–Moscow coordination, it is noteworthy that the Chinese Foreign Minister had first forwarded the so-called “double suspension” proposal on March 8, 2017.⁶⁰ At a summit in Moscow on July 4, Xi and Putin announced a joint initiative based on the idea that military tensions on the Korean Peninsula can be immediately de-escalated through a three-stage implementation of a “double freeze” of US–South Korean military maneuvers and DPRK nuclear missile tests.⁶¹ As Russia’s observer Artyom Lukin noted, “it was the first time that China and Russia had so clearly articulated their common position with respect to North Korea.”⁶²

Still, it was obviously China that assumed the lead in the Korea diplomacy among the two Eurasian powers. One Chinese expert additionally claims that that “secret first” meetings between North and South Korean officials took place in China during November 2017.⁶³ Most illustrative of China’s major role in Korean Peninsula diplomacy were the five summit meetings that took place between Xi and Kim during 2018–19. Reporting on Kim’s historic first trip to Beijing in March 2018, Chinese expert Su Xiaohui observed that Kim had already been invited to Russia some time ago, but she suggested that it is highly significant that the North Korean leader’s first trip abroad was to Beijing.⁶⁴

Even as China’s influence over the Korean Peninsula appeared to be growing apace, there are ample signs that Russia as “junior partner” remained a component of Beijing’s larger strategy in Korean affairs. According to one Russian specialist, “Top Russian officials, including Putin himself, have repeatedly praised China as the country that has contributed the most to the current diplomatic progress on the peninsula.”⁶⁵ Still, Moscow remained active, for instance, by inviting Moon in mid–2018 with Moon even addressing the Duma. The Russian press delighted in Moon’s interest in Russian proposals to increase security and

trade ties.⁶⁶ Two Chinese authors, both graduates of Kim Il-sung University in Pyongyang, are highly skeptical of American motives and assess that for North Korea, “having nuclear weapons means securing life and denuclearization means death.” Notably, they observe that “China-Russia cooperation could be among the decisive external factors in the future of the Korean Peninsula.”⁶⁷ And this sense appears to be reciprocated on the Russian side.

Russian North Korea expert Toloraya praised a Chinese proposal: “CRID—‘conditional, reciprocal, incremental denuclearization’ ... I like this formula ... it represents a gradual process of disarmament.”⁶⁸ During October 2018, Russia put on the enormous Vostok [East] military exercises with substantial Chinese participation. Stephen Blank notes that Russia’s Vostok-2018 exercise originally reflected apprehension about a US strike on North Korea that could oblige them to respond.⁶⁹ It was likely not at all coincidental that during the same month North Korean, Russian and Chinese deputy foreign ministers gathered for “their first ever trilateral meeting in Moscow. The present China-Russia-DPRK coalition is in a sense a throwback to the 1950s when all three countries were Communist allies against the United States—only this time it is Beijing, rather than Moscow, that is the leader of the trio,” surmised Artyom Lukin.⁷⁰ The Putin summit with Kim in Vladivostok during April 2019 underlined, once again, Moscow’s emergence as “junior partner” but the crowning achievement of years of summitry for Pyongyang was undoubtedly Xi’s visit to the North Korean capital in July 2019. According to the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs: “Pyongyang was brimming with luxuriant landscape, blooming flowers, and a friendly atmosphere.”⁷¹

Amidst the Covid-19 health and economic shocks, many observers are coming around to realize that little has actually changed on the Korean Peninsula despite the many crises, along with the parade of summits during the last five years. Yet, Russia and China continue to harmonize their strategies with respect to the Korean Peninsula, coordinating in multi-lateral forums, especially within the UN Security Council, and pursuing common military deterrence, arms control, sanctions, and economic development policies.

IV. Into the Cauldron of War: Moscow’s Evolving Approach after February 2022

North Korea has become a staunch supporter of Russia in international venues by opposing the UN voting against Russian aggression in both February and March 2022.⁷² Pyongyang also did not support the UNGA resolution condemning Russia’s decision to annex the four southeastern regions of Ukraine on September 29, 2022.⁷³ As prominent Korea expert Andrei Lankov observes, by voting against anti-Russian resolutions North Korean diplomats receive votes from their Russian counterparts against resolutions harmful to the DPRK, which Russia can block in the UN Security Council.⁷⁴ Along with China’s pro-Russian neutrality, Pyongyang’s support of the Kremlin has raised the question of future relations between Moscow and the Kim regime against the background of Russia’s increased dependency on China. In addition, Moscow’s long-nurtured cooperative relations with Seoul have significantly deteriorated.⁷⁵

On one hand, Moscow’s position toward the situation on the Korean Peninsula has not changed much. Russia’s strategic alignment with North Korea for the past two decades has been driven by Russia’s intent to constrain Pyongyang’s risky unilateral behavior that stirred

Moscow's fear of being dragged into an unwanted military contingency.⁷⁶ Russia has not been supportive of North Korea's nuclear status out of a belief that tensions on the Korean Peninsula could be used by the US to intensify hostilities, leading to an escalation of the arms race. Partnership with Pyongyang has long remained a factor of Russia's domestic politics, due to historical and ideological commonalities.⁷⁷ Prior to the war in Ukraine, Russia had been consistent in pursuing its "equidistance" strategy, developing ties with both North and South Korea. Lacking nonhegemonic ambitions in the Asia-Pacific, Russia has been seeking to help Pyongyang diplomatically, preferably playing the role of a facilitator of prospective bilateral US–North Korea or multilateral arms control and confidence-building agreements.⁷⁸ At the same time, Russia has been consistent in supporting international sanctions against North Korea.⁷⁹ As the Russian ambassador to North Korea Alexander Matsegora recently stated, Russia remains interested in the normalization of inter-Korean relations, but Moscow prefers that the North and South hold direct talks without outside interference.⁸⁰

On the other hand, after the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine war, Moscow has become even more articulate about North Korea's rationale for nuclearization given the growing external security threat from the upgraded US–South Korea alliance. As Stephen Blank noted, Russia (and China) had been regarding the whole crisis on the Korean Peninsula as a regional security issue, rather than merely a denuclearization problem.⁸¹ This logic has become even more appealing to Moscow since February 2022. Pyongyang has seemingly realized the limits of its conventional combat capabilities, and this has likely prompted the DPRK in 2022 to compensate by significantly increasing the intensity of its missile tests.⁸²

Appreciative of Pyongyang's consistent support of Moscow's war in Ukraine, the Russian leadership has become one of the two most active regional powers (along with China) that oppose Western pressure on Pyongyang, pointing to unwarranted US policies as the root cause of the region's security crisis. Igor Vishnevetsky, deputy director of the Department for Nonproliferation and Arms Control of the Russian Foreign Ministry, asserts that the US has been "doing everything to convince Pyongyang of the need to possess nuclear weapons to protect its sovereignty...."⁸³

By summer 2022, as the Biden administration increased its military and financial support of Ukraine within its strategy "to escalate to de-escalate,"⁸⁴ Pyongyang made some important moves to signal its unshakeable solidarity with Moscow. On July 13, 2022, North Korea became the fifth country to recognize the Luhansk and Donetsk republics of Donbas, which led to intensive diplomatic exchange between these regions and Pyongyang. These ties included participation of North Korea's construction workers in rebuilding war-torn zones of eastern Ukraine. Some Russian experts indicated that Russia's actions in Ukraine led to a fundamental change in the strategy of North Korea and to closer relations between Moscow and North Korea.⁸⁵

In 2023, Russia has remained determined to block any US attempts to tighten the sanctions regime against Pyongyang.⁸⁶ The Kim leadership has been emboldened by the new opportunity to re-engage Russia. In January 2023, the DPRK's top-ranking party official Kim Yo-jung, Kim Jong-un's sister, criticized the Western decision to supply modern tanks to Ukraine, stating that North Korea would "always stand in the same trench" side by side with the Russian army and people.⁸⁷ On June 12, 2023, North Korean leader Kim Jong-un sent a congratulatory telegram to President Putin on the occasion of Russia's National Day

expressing continuous solidarity and support from North Korea. US officials also accused the North Korean leadership of supplying Russia with weapons allegedly intended for the Wagner private military company.⁸⁸

An increasing number of Russian strategists opine that Russia should recognize the DPRK as a full-fledged and equal ally. Trade relations between Moscow and Pyongyang remain on a very low level, which stands in a great contrast with approximately US\$15.3 billion in bilateral trade between North Korea and China.⁸⁹ One prominent Russian strategist Sergey Markov suggests that Russia should immediately withdraw from all anti-North Korean sanctions agreements. He also contends that Pyongyang has had good reason to create its nuclear weapons since it deters the threat of missile strikes from South Korea which is “occupied by the US.” He additionally believes that there have never been any legitimate grounds for imposing sanctions against the DPRK or Russia. Markov calls for opening up grain supplies to Pyongyang, in exchange for “relatively cheap North Korean shells and missiles...” for use in the Ukraine War. In addition, according to Markov, the North Korean army should become directly involved into the Ukraine War, both to assist the Russians and also to gain combat experience.⁹⁰ Another Russian policy strategist has proposed the formation of an official defense alliance with North Korea.⁹¹

There are also growing questions in Russia with respect to sanctions against North Korea. One prominent Russian Korea expert Alexander Zhebin argues that the UN sanctions aimed to secure the non-proliferation regime, and, being comprehensive, have also targeted North Korea’s conventional weapons manufacturing capabilities, including the defensive ones, which places Pyongyang in a very vulnerable position while Japan and South Korea, in alliance with the US, successfully upgrade and modernize their conventional weapons, some of which are currently being supplied to Poland and may ultimately end up in Ukraine. As a result, the sanctions, which have been designed to curb North Korea’s nuclear missile programs, “produced the exact opposite result: facing additional difficulties in maintaining a conventional deterrence potential, Pyongyang has accelerated its nuclear missile program in order to compensate for the growing imbalance in this area.”⁹² For the initial period of the war, Moscow and Pyongyang denied any transfer of equipment or ammunition supplies from North Korea into Russia for the war in Ukraine. Nevertheless, the Russian ambassador Matsegora highly appraised the achievements of the North Korean defense industry. In addition, Russia has restored regular railway communication with North Korea, and it intends to resume coal supplies via North Korea in the autumn of 2023.

Russia’s Ukraine conundrum has been beneficial for Pyongyang, as it has been able to make North Korea an even more important partner for Moscow.⁹³ In April 2023, prior to his visit to Washington, South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol promised to undertake “appropriate measures” to go beyond limitations to support Ukraine, “a country that’s been illegally invaded both under international and domestic law.”⁹⁴ On the day of this interview (April 18, 2023), Chinese President Xi Jinping expressed in a telegram to North Korean leader Kim Jong-un his readiness to develop bilateral relations and take them to a new level. The Kremlin responded that supplying arms to Ukraine “would make Seoul a participant in the conflict,” and Korea’s military assistance to Kyiv will have an “extremely negative” effect on Moscow’s approach “to resolving the situation on the Korean Peninsula.” Russia’s ex-president Dmitry Medvedev warned that in case of Korea’s arms supplies to Ukraine, the “latest samples of Russian weapons” would be provided to North Korea. Some popular

patriotic Russian media even suggested that Moscow should take the DPRK under the Russian “nuclear umbrella,” and invite North Korean military personnel or volunteers to train in Ukraine to disable South Korean weapons that could harm their country in the event of a war on the Korean Peninsula.⁹⁵ At the time of publication in October 2023, it is now confirmed that North Korean arms and munitions are indeed flowing into Russia for use in the Ukraine War.

In the current complex international security environment, Moscow’s strategic coordination with Beijing on North Korea could be considered as one of the key problems facing Russia’s new strategic exchanges with Pyongyang. Russian expert Igor Nikolaychuk believes that Moscow has to follow the policy course toward North Korea set by China.⁹⁶ But, given the new circumstances and the formation of a triangular alignment among China, Russia, and North Korea, the latter is receiving an opportunity to be integrated into a new Eurasian grouping.⁹⁷

V. China’s Reappraisal in the Wake of the Ukraine Crisis

For reasons of both proximity and power, Beijing’s view of the Korean Peninsula remains significantly more important than Moscow’s. Overall, there is evidence that China is greatly disturbed by the direction of affairs in Northeast Asia, and on the Korean Peninsula in particular since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

According to Chinese sources, the tightening of the South Korea–US alliance has been well underway since early 2021, when the Biden Administration came into office. It is noted that the Trump Administration fostered major anti–American sentiment in South Korea by pressuring Seoul to pay “an exorbitant price” in order to retain the US troop presence in South Korea. This tactic is even described as a form of “extortion” [敲詐]. However, the improved alliance relationship was manifested, for example, by South Korean participation in limited-scale aerial exercises, alongside Japanese and US forces in mid-2021 in Alaska. But, as Chinese observers noted, such cooperation was undertaken “within certain limits.” Indeed, the trend in Northeast Asian geopolitics was quite visible just prior to Russia’s momentous invasion, since a trilateral statement by US, Japan, and South Korean foreign ministers was made on February 12, 2022. This statement apparently unnerved Beijing, since it was the first time such a statement had mentioned Taiwan. Chinese commentators rue the passing of ROK former progressive President Moon Jae-in’s “balanced” policy and view President Yoon Suk-yeol’s willingness to “lean to one side” as deeply troubling. It was immediately recognized that the coalescing of the South Korean–US alliance would be accelerated with Yoon’s election and the nearly simultaneous set of violent actions in Eastern Europe. Taken together, these developments had a “negative impact” on China’s relations with South Korea.⁹⁸

As tensions have been growing on the Korean Peninsula, Chinese military analysts have been monitoring the military balance between the two Koreas quite carefully. For instance, a special issue of a Chinese military-affiliated magazine published in August 2022 made a special examination of Pyongyang’s military modernization efforts across the whole spectrum of forces, including both conventional and nuclear capabilities. One of the articles in

that series particularly emphasized that North Korea is hard at work absorbing the military lessons of the Ukraine War. Notably, this has meant a new emphasis on upgrading North Korean conventional military forces, with a particular focus on armor, rocket forces, and air defenses that “could be more appropriate to a flexible, multi-domain combat environment.”⁹⁹ Another article in this series reported on progress in North Korea’s submarine fabrication, including apparent progress in the domain of nuclear-powered submarines. This Chinese assessment characterizes this as a serious project and observes that a successful nuclear submarine program would constitute “significant progress for [Pyongyang’s] nuclear deterrent.”¹⁰⁰ Notably, the article does mention more than once the importance of Russian technical help to North Korea’s missile programs after the collapse of the USSR.¹⁰¹ Although concerned that the US would use a more robust DPRK nuclear posture to accelerate regional missile defenses, the same article opined that Washington presently seeks to “use tensions on the Korean Peninsula to disturb China’s development, while dividing and controlling the countries of Northeast Asia in order to safeguard [US] hegemonic interests...” This Chinese military assessment interestingly does not mention “denuclearization,” but insists that China must follow the path of a “responsible great power” and thus convince all sides to make compromises and avoid extremist positions.¹⁰²

Immediately after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Chinese media did cover North Korean leader Kim Jong-un’s emphatic endorsement of Vladimir Putin’s decision to initiate the bloody conflict. According to one Chinese rendering: “The spokesperson of the North Korean Foreign Ministry pointed out: ‘The United States and the West have razed Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya to the ground, but now they use the Ukrainian crisis caused by them to talk about respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity without shame. Contradictory statements are untenable.’”¹⁰³

There could be little doubt about coalescing Chinese and Russian perspectives on the Korean Peninsula after they jointly vetoed a US attempt to ratchet up sanctions following Pyongyang’s ballistic missile tests in May 2022. Throughout that year, Chinese military and geopolitical news carried extensive and quite critical coverage of the increasing pace of US–South Korean joint military exercises.¹⁰⁴

One manifestation of China’s increasing adherence to a Russian world view can be seen in Beijing’s ever-growing hostility toward NATO. For example, China’s reaction to NATO General Secretary Jens Stoltenberg’s visit to South Korea in February 2023 was quite negative.¹⁰⁵ A month later, Chinese media reported that Seoul was requesting assistance from both China and Russia “to prompt North Korea to stop provocations.”¹⁰⁶ Implying that Beijing does not necessarily view closer ties between Pyongyang and Moscow as problematic, one recent Chinese commentary notes: “The military cooperation intention between North Korea and Russia not only reflects the traditional friendship and strategic interests between the two countries, but also reflects the common challenges and pressures between the two countries.”¹⁰⁷ A rather pessimistic Chinese appraisal of Seoul’s new approach observes that South Korea has adopted the view that Russia is now an “enemy,” but also has deeply offended China by aligning so closely with the US and inserting itself on such sensitive issues as the South China Sea, and even the Taiwan issue.¹⁰⁸ Another Chinese assessment also sees major damage to Chinese interests in the short term, but holds out the hope that Seoul will realize such a hostile approach is contrary to South Korean interests and will only raise tensions with North Korea.¹⁰⁹

As it seems to be preparing for the onset of reinforced bipolarity on the Korean Peninsula, Beijing is both boosting trade with Pyongyang and simultaneously blaming Washington for not treating “legitimate security concerns of the DPRK” with adequate seriousness, for increasing its military presence, and “for not abiding by the principle of ‘commitment to commitment, action to action’” in its dealings with North Korea.¹¹⁰

The war in Ukraine brought Russia and a Russia-friendly China closer. At the same time, North Korea capitalized on its support of Russia to enhance its role in the geopolitical setting in Northeast Asia, raising its stakes vis-à-vis both China and Russia, which now have to work harder to safeguard the Pyongyang regime and balance against the US pressure on North Korea. Obviously, the Ukraine-Russia conflict accelerated the polarization process in the Asia-Pacific region. China’s role in the North Korea-related affairs has grown, and Russia’s dependency on Beijing has become more visible. At the same time, in its dealings with North Korea and Russia—both living under unprecedented global sanctions—the Chinese leaders are now in a better position to delegate some sensitive security or economy-related projects to Moscow, which might be more willing to further compensate the sanctions pressure against Pyongyang by becoming a facilitator of China–Russia–North Korea’s common “counter-hegemonic” policies. In addition, the conflict with Ukraine supported by NATO with its Pacific ambitions triggered serious domestic changes in Russia and China and appears to have resulted in the rise of more nationalistic and patriotic elites, who are more inclined to ally with North Korea. China will have the upper hand in this process but, having this leverage in Korean affairs and Russia’s potential role in them, Beijing might end up in a better negotiating position with the US over the prospective security order in the Pacific.

VI: Policy Recommendations

The following policy recommendations are offered given the evidently increasing pattern of high-level China–Russia coordination on the Korean Peninsula.

R1. Enhance Deterrence—The Russian invasion of Ukraine illustrates that major wars still occur in the modern world and may also suggest that certain regimes could be prone to aggressive behavior and risk-taking. The US–South Korea alliance has played a role in keeping the peace for well over half a century. Steps toward filling gaps in deterrence, for example by undertaking joint planning for nuclear contingencies as outlined in the April 2023 Washington Declaration, are warranted.¹¹¹

R2. Encourage Cross-Cutting Cleavages to Dilute Bipolarity—This paper has demonstrated growing tendencies toward bipolarity or a consolidation of blocs. But even in the recent past, various countries, including South Korea, have attempted quite successfully to reach across the growing divide. Tokyo’s recent overtures to Pyongyang are a noteworthy example of such an initiative and could play an important role in reducing regional tensions.¹¹²

R3. Pursue “Action for Action” Negotiations—It is significant that the arms control proposal promoted by Beijing and Moscow, the so-called “double freeze” plan, enjoyed a modicum of success between 2017 and 2021. The plan was devoid of ideology, did not depend on an intrusive inspections regime, sought to deliver a “win” for each side, and involved little in the way of process. Scholars in both China and Russia have continuously advocated for

“action-for-action” [同步措施] negotiations rather than a “big bang” theory of peace on the Korean Peninsula.

R4. *Deal Both China and Russia into the Future Regional Architecture*—The Korean Peninsula is close enough to China’s heartland to comprise a “core interest” for Beijing. Only China has the economic, historical, and cultural heft to nudge Pyongyang in a reformist direction. Regarding Moscow’s role, even some Russian experts have suggested that Russia should bow out of participation in talks regarding the future of the Korean Peninsula. However, neither Beijing nor Pyongyang are likely to accept an approach that excludes Moscow, particularly in the wake of the Kim-Putin summit of September 2023. Western countries will find that an inclusive and realistic architecture is more durable over the long run.

R5. *Enable a “Hong Kong” at Rajin*—The mellowing of North Korea requires that it pulls back from totalitarian control of the economy—a process already underway. Seoul’s impressive success in the commercial realm creates an acute sense of inferiority among North Koreans, so that reformist winds must blow from the north, rather than the south. Chinese scholars recently appraised the geography around the North Korean port of Rajin and claimed that it could become a viable regional transport hub, connecting China’s landlocked northeastern provinces to its maritime neighbors and proposed the “model of the free port [自由港模式]” that could “become the 3-country economic cooperation engine.”¹¹³

R6. *Promulgate an “Umbrella Strategy” for North Korea*—If the US and its allies are to pursue arms control and crisis management mechanisms with North Korea, they must help develop “security guarantees” for North Korea and these steps should go beyond polite words and solemn oaths. Chinese specialists have been regularly calling for an “umbrella strategy” [雨伞战略] that would ensure security for the regime in Pyongyang. Strengthening China-Russia strategic coordination in Northeast Asia could plausibly help to alleviate this major power asymmetry at the heart of the North Korea crisis.

VII. Conclusion

This paper surveys both historical trends and contemporary developments related to the impact of the China-Russia quasi-alliance on the Korean Peninsula. The focus on Chinese-language and Russian-language sources makes this research unique and provides enhanced fidelity on this issue of seminal importance to the future of security in Northeast Asia.

The findings confirm the trend toward gradually expanding cooperation between Beijing and Moscow concerning questions related to North Korea that encompass diplomatic, information, economic, and military policies. To some extent, “the return to bipolarity ... solidifies the hostility and adversarial nature of regional dynamics...”¹¹⁴ Pyongyang has clearly benefited from the Ukraine War—not least by the distraction of the major world powers, including the US. Russia has long been sympathetic to North Korea, a fact demonstrated powerfully by Putin’s July 2000 trip to Pyongyang shortly after he became Russia’s president. Today, the Kremlin’s isolation is undoubtedly a deep impetus for rapidly warming North Korea–Russia ties that precipitated the recent landmark Kim-Putin summit.

That is indeed a major development, but Beijing’s influence is significantly more important, of course. Chinese leaders remain cautious about embracing any kind of *troika*

encompassing Beijing, Moscow, and Pyongyang, since it views solidifying bipolarity in Northeast Asia as counter to its conception of regional security and development. The West and its close allies in East Asia should recognize that the situation is delicate and could suddenly become much more fraught, for example if major quantities of North Korean military equipment or even DPRK “volunteers” were to appear in Donbas.¹¹⁵ Understanding such major risks of an escalation spiral that a return to the hard bipolarity of the 1950s would entail for the Korean Peninsula, decision-makers on both sides of this divide are urged to act with due caution and restraint.

Notes

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