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North Korea: Twenty Years of Solitude

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We present two complementary perspectives on North Korea that locate the issues of North Korea isolation and nuclear proliferation within broader regional and global frameworks related to the six-party talks in general, and US-North Korean relations in particular.

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A Russian Perspective on US-North Korea Relations

Georgy Toloraya

The approach suggested by John Delury seems to be sound and pragmatic and takes into account the (to put it mildly) less then desirable efficiency of US policy over last two decades towards North Korea. I agree that the Obama Administration's policy goal should be changed from a purely non-proliferation agenda to "a far-reaching process of creating peace on the Korean peninsula". Only such a policy could eventually solve the nuclear and other WMD issues, reduce military tensions, and bring North Korea back into the mainstream of world development. Such an approach would enjoy broad international support. While the paper candidly analyzes the challenges involved in US cooperation with major international actors it leaves out the role of Russia. John Delury writes: "I'll leave it to the new administration's Russian advisors to think through the Moscow angle". I would suppose that Russia would strongly support such a "strategic engagement" policy with Pyongyang as it fully corresponds with its long-standing position and national interests – peace, stability, and development in the neighboring area, as well as non-proliferation, and multilateral approaches that take into account the interests of all the parties. This would create new opportunities of US-Russia cooperation on Korean issue.

Russian policy-makers from the mid-1990s have been increasingly wary of the ultimate objectives of the US on the Korean peninsula. They feared that the US would pursue a goal of regime change, which would cause economic and humanitarian problems for the Russian Far East and an unwelcome change in the geopolitical balance. As a result Russia would get an "eastern flank of NATO" on its borders. The Republican Administration's policies between 2002 and 2006 were increasingly at odds with Russia's stated policy goals. A US attempt to strategically shift the sub-regional balance of power and attempt to increase its domination in Korea by undermining the DPRK would be a challenge for Russia.

Moscow is also not happy with constant underestimation of the Russian role in Korean affairs and neglect of its interests. It is still often seen in the US as merely supporting China on principal issues in Korean affairs and not playing an independent role. These days Russia is increasingly seen as an opponent, if not foe, of the West. After the war in South Ossetia, US-Russian cooperation in international affairs seems to have become mere wishful thinking. However this 'linear' logic should not necessarily be true in the Korean case – the latter issue might well be called a special one in Russia-US relations. The Obama Administration could take a bold approach in this area as well.

It is true that a possible US-North Korean rapprochement (which would enable North Korea to play its favorite "balancing" game as it did in the past, logger-heading the USSR and PRC) would represent a new reality. However Russian interests would not necessarily be challenged, as some Moscow conservatives fear, unless North Korea became a US client state (an unlikely case that would still be mostly a headache for the Chinese). Russia has no need to devise a strategy to diminish US influence or to contradict US policy vis-à-vis Korea (unless of course, this policy is aimed to increase tension on the peninsula and attempts to resort to a military solution or non-military pressure tactics). At the same time there are common goals and common approaches related to Korean policies. In my opinion Obama-Medvedev cooperation should not be limited to nuclear issue, but should also include broader security and economic issues.

It could include:

* Increased policy coordination through political, diplomatic and track 2 channels. There is still a need to build trust between the parties' intentions and plans on the Korean peninsula. Now that stronger coordination in the "trilateral group" (US-Japan-ROK) is on the agenda why not think about a more efficient (in addition to ad hoc vice-ministerial level consultations) permanent channel of US-Russian communication on Korean and North East Asian affairs? One possibility would be through the US Embassy in Moscow as well as regular meetings of directly responsible officials. That would also help increase awareness in Moscow of US attention to this issue and raise its "rating" among Russian foreign policy-makers.

* An idea of setting a trilateral – US-China-Russia consultation mechanism on Korean affairs is worth exploring.

* Doing away with North Korean nuclear infrastructure (dealing with North Korean nuclear facilities and materials, deactivation, verification, nuclear expertise, re-training of specialists and other aspects of possible Nunn-Lugar program implementation in North Korea) is important. This type of interaction could probably include other North Korean WMD based on relevant Russian post-Cold war experience. In the later stages of the peninsula demilitarization the issue of conventional armaments and CBM regime could become an area for US-Russian cooperation.

* Possibilities should be sought for joint efforts in creation of the regional security and cooperation mechanisms. Moscow is still hesitant to embrace a full-fledged OSCE-type structure that might only increase the US hold on the region without tangible benefits for Russia and other regional actors. A concept of what the agenda of the multilateral forum (apart from the North Korean question) could be and what would be the sequence of stages for establishing such a structure is still lacking and most countries do not feel any urgency in developing one. In 2003 the US picked up the idea of multiparty talks, for years promoted by Russia, and used its leadership to implement it. A pragmatic Russia-US partnership in preparing the 'rules of the game' in Northeast Asia (where Russia poses no threats to US interests) could become a historic chance for Russia to be accepted as a responsible stakeholder in the region.

* Coordination of issues related to the economic assistance and development of North Korea is necessary. Russia has a vested economic interest in the Korean peninsula and also sees it as a “door” to Asia, especially in the energy sector. Transportation and infrastructure development are the natural areas where Russian interest are obvious and should be coordinated with those of the other parties. Russia would also like to have a stake in a possible LWR project should it be eventually agreed upon.

The change of governments should not lead to a pause in Russian-US cooperation on Korean affairs, which could appear not because of divergence in opinions, but because of lack of trust, attention, and political will. The expert communities of the two countries should increase their efforts to sustain the bilateral dialogue and build up trust. A good start might be a bilateral discussion of the future scenarios for North Korea’s evolution (which is now lacking) and on the long-term strategies associated with it.

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