

Policy Forum 03-29A: A Role For Russia In Korean Settlement

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A Role For Russia In Korean Settlement

By David Wolff

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I. Introduction

This paper was originally prepared for the Task Force on U.S. Korea Policy sponsored by the Center for International Policy and Center for East Asian Studies, University of Chicago, Brookings Institution, Washington, January 9, 2003. The 28-member panel included Admiral William J. Crowe, Jr., former Chairman of the Joint-Chiefs of Staff; two former U.S. ambassadors to South Korea, Donald P. Gregg and James T. Laney; Lee H. Hamilton, Vice-Chairman of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States; Ambassador Robert L. Gallucci, who negotiated the 1994 Agreed Framework with North Korea; and Selig S. Harrison, Chairman of the Task Force, Director of the Asia Program at the Center for International Policy and a leading Korea expert; and the directors of research institutes specializing in Korea and East Asia at ten leading Universities. The Task Force convened on three occasions between November 2002 and January 2003. It was co-sponsored by the Center for International Policy and the Center for East Asian Studies of the University of Chicago. Funding was provided by the Ford Foundation, the Carnegie Corporation and the Center for East Asian Studies. For more information on the task force:
<http://www.ciponline.org/asia/>

David Wolff, Senior Scholar, Cold War International History Project at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, asserts that US-Russia cooperation can play a significant role in settlement of the Korean Peninsula, as it will provide security assurances to Pyongyang from a source it trusts more than the US, while providing a stepping stone on the way to expansions and improvements in US-NK ties and renewed cooperation with the IAEA. It points the way toward regional discussions that will not automatically turn into a reprise on Cold War alliances with the US-Japan-SK triangle opposing the Russia-China-NK side.

The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Nautilus Institute. Readers should note that Nautilus seeks a diversity of views and opinions on contentious topics in order to identify common ground.

II. Essay by David Wolff

"A Role For Russia In Korean Settlement"

by David Wolff

Senior Scholar, Cold War International History Project at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars

In the 1980s, it was all the rage for America to try and imitate the "Japanese miracle". In the 1990s the collapsed and rather chaotic former Soviet Union spoke longingly of the "Chinese model," a more orderly transition to the market mediated by the party elite still resolutely maintaining control of a few crucial institutions. Now, Moscow sources insist, the North Koreans are drawn to "Russian structures," where the "power ministries" dominate the agenda and the rich natural resource base is sufficient to keep a small elite well-fed. This makes some think that a Russian presence in the process could help broker the verifiable discontinuation of all North Korean WMD programs, if coupled to a plan to guarantee Pyongyang's security and a reliable source of energy in one form or another. North Korea would surrender all weapons of mass destruction and their components that may be on North Korean soil at the time that agreement comes into effect. Production programs will also be permanently terminated.

As additional quid pro quo, North Korea would be required to open up its country and society sufficiently to allow gradual transition toward a more democratic market and make sure that no hidden assets could remain under cover. All Russians with whom I talked, who have actually spent

time with Kim Chong Il (and the Russians are the foreigners who have spent the most time with him), insist that he is ready to open his country, but gradually. The shift to a mixed economy, they say, is already prepared. He surfs the internet every morning, one of the few comrades with the means to do so. Was it not President Putin who announced to the G-8 in Okinawa that Kim is a "perfectly modern man?"

Russian influence, flowing from a visit Kim Chong Il made to Vladivostok to summit with President Vladimir Putin in August 2002, is unequivocally claimed to be at the root of this fall's North Korean initiative. Indeed, it appears that Kim Chong Il put out the first feelers that led to the Koizumi visit just after returning from Russia. The 2002 visit during which Kim pronounced himself "1000% happy," came a year after a 21-day rail trip back and forth across Siberia with lobsters, a wine cellar and four female conductresses trained to sing karaoke That Moscow was the prime sponsor and supporter of the North Korean regime from its inception is not forgotten in Pyongyang. Nor are insults, both perceived and real, at the hands of Soviet advisors, generals, managers, and party functionaries from Stalin to Yeltsin. Afer all, it was the Gorbachev, and then Yeltsin, elimination of subsidized energy exports to Korea that originally plunged North Korea into the economic crisis and famine that has now gone on for over a decade. [1] Agricultural infrastructure, following the Soviet model, had been predicated on cheap fuel products and byproducts for tractors, irrigation pumps, fertilizer and distribution. In Pyongyang's eyes, it was Russian perfidy that suddenly, and fatally for hunger's victims, made this model untenable.

China's decision, shortly thereafter, to eliminate deliveries of subsidized petro-products cut even deeper. [2] Russia and China saw eye-to-eye again during a Putin-Jiang summit in December 2002, where the call for a nuclear-weapon free Korean peninsula was coupled to a demand for continued negotiations and the maintenance of all existing agreements. Weapons that can reach Tokyo can also attack Beijing; those that endanger San Diego are also a threat to Moscow. [3] Instability and desperation are extreme situations that, by their very nature, lack rationality and directionality. Together with resistance to trans-Atlantic views on human rights and in cooperation with America on anti-terrorist policies, concerns about nuclear proliferation in Korea and Japan are fueling the joint Russo-Chinese search for a path to a "multi-polar" world. Whether in collaboration or in competition (or somewhere in-between), the US is indispensably part of the shadow triangle.

Pyongyang, however, has a rich experience of exploiting divisions between Moscow and Beijing. This tendency can still be traced in Kim's alternating visits to Russia and China as well as the pipeline projects that would pass through Korea. One version, the eastern one crossing into Russia on its landborder with North Korea, would avoid Chinese involvement altogether. [4] On the other hand, the railroad along the Korean west coast, a project with much lower initial investment costs, would boost the Chinese competitor to the Trans-Siberian, the Bei-xin trunkline. The pipeline project that passes through China would offer Beijing double influence, both as customer and transit provider. [5] It should also be kept in mind that gas imports can not satisfy North Korea's agricultural and transportation needs. For the moment, all of these projects are still in various stages of planning, while feasibility is ascertained and funding is sought.

Underlying Principles

Solutions should aim to be inclusive. The idealist argument is obvious (if you are an idealist). The realist version emphasizes the potential of any actor at the regional level to spoil the game for everyone else in the region. WMDs and easily available missile kits have made this more relevant recently. North Korea is a perfect case in point and, of course, Russia could do too, if it felt it necessary. [6] Powerful Russian constituencies for arms exports call for this daily.

Comprehensive solutions last longer. If a consensus can be found for major change, there is probably sufficient momentum to move other problems. The end of the Cold War has left certain recognized anomalies in the interstate system that were created in the mold of circumstances that are simply no more. Why not iron some of these tensions out? A general resolution of the crisis, which must quickly lead to the voluntary and verifiable, permanent dismantlement and destruction of all WMD and WMD components, should certainly lead to the signing of a peace treaty. Russia also supports this.

Openness is usually a good thing leading towards democratic processes. The whole NK nuclear possibility would not have come to pass, if NK was a more transparent and welcoming place. Whatever Korea becomes after unification, it must be open to the world. Other governments in the region would also benefit from increased exercise of this practice.

Policies

1. Give US-Russian cooperation a more central role in a comprehensive settlement of the Korean nuclear issue. This provides security assurances to Pyongyang from a source it trusts more than the US, while providing a stepping stone on the way to expansions and improvements in US-NK ties and renewed cooperation with the IAEA. It points the way toward regional discussions that will not automatically turn into a reprise on Cold War alliances with the US-Japan-SK triangle opposing the Russia-China-NK side.

Mechanisms:

A) Build on experience, contacts and "roadmaps" generated by the Nunn-Lugar legislation to create a new Joint Russian-American Commission ("A") to engage the NK nuclear issue. This has been one of the most successful arenas of US-CIS cooperation in the 1990s, leading to the destruction of nuclear warheads, increased physical security at a wide range of nuclear sites and employment for experts who might otherwise have gone astray. The Russian side of this arrangement is also likely to be somewhat knowledgeable about the state of NK nuclear projects, since most NK experts were trained in the Soviet Union and NK reactors were built with Russian aid. This Commission could pave the way for the full implementation of the 1994 agreement, possibly with appropriate negotiated modifications, before turning the verification process back over to the IAEA. Recent Jiang-Bush and Jiang-Putin agreements might also pave the road for China to also join, thereby including all members of NE Asia's nuclear club in efforts to prevent proliferation in the region.

B) Extend US-Russia cooperation on the search for POW/MIA fates and remains to a broader regional mission, including kidnappees and other missing persons, all victims of the ongoing Korean War. The Pentagon presently spends \$55 million per year on this task which enjoys popularity in Congress and among Americans more broadly. Acceptance of this Commission ("B") would make it possibly to break the deadlock in NK-Japan relations by allowing a definitive investigation of this deeply emotional issue. Such a step is almost certainly essential to liberate Japanese capital for NK infrastructure projects. Just as a Putin whisper appears to have started the process in August 2002, Russian participation could in this way bring the initiative to fruition. Successful joint exhumations and burials would provide a very public way of putting the Korean war experience to rest, while the military-to-military contacts necessary to fulfill this mission would already serve as a de facto confidence-building measure. Finally, since leads would take Commission B personnel throughout Korea to interview individuals, this initiative would contribute to opening North Korea to the outside world.

C) Create a scholarly Historical Commission ("C") to excavate archival materials in all regional capitals pertinent to conflictual issues over twenty years old. This will help take such matters out of the political realm where they are counterproductive to settlement negotiations and put them into the cold, calm hands of the experts. A sub-commission should focus on "missed opportunities" for earlier negotiations and conflict avoidance as precedents for today's policies. Commission C would help put the Korean conflict in regional perspective by airing views from all sides, while encouraging the crucial principle of openness. The National Security Archive at George Washington University, with its recent experience in Iran, could well serve as coordinator for Commission C.

2. Take advantage of any momentum gained on the Korean issue to move towards comprehensive settlement of divisive Northeast Asian / Asian-Pacific problems dating from the Cold War, i.e., Russo-Japanese Peace Treaty, Taiwan, US military presence. Regional and comprehensive approaches to problem-solving suggest that once the pack ice breaks, there is an opportunity for a clean sweep.

In the US Interest

Most immediately, while the Bush administration is focused on the Persian Gulf and Mideast, it is in the American interest to encourage the NK regime to desist in its efforts to produce WMDs and delivery systems, while building consensus on the NK issue among all regional players. Coordination and cooperation with Russia clearly assists these two goals. Even without constituting Commission A, the most substantive of the above initiatives, regional commissions on POW/MIA/non-combatant missing persons and historical issues contribute to the removal of roadblocks to a future peaceful settlement. In Asia, perhaps more than other places, it is hard to move forward before settling accounts with the past.

In a timeframe of 3-5 years, i.e., probably the last chance to prevent NK from acquiring nuclear status and intercontinental missiles, [\[7\]](#) NK compliance with Commission A and IAEA requirements can probably only be met in tandem with military, political and energy security guarantees. It is most appropriate for Russia to provide the last of these, since gas and, possibly, nuclear-generated electricity inputs would probably come from Siberia and since both American and Russian policy is presently set on a course requiring expansion of Russia's oil/gas export capacity. In return, Russia expects infrastructure investment both for the pipeline and for the east coast railroad connecting to the Trans-Siberian. In a peaceful political environment, these could well be profitable ventures.

In the long term (15-30 years), the issue of Korean unification comes to the fore. This is likely to be a momentous process for Asia-Pacific, for after transitional adjustments, unified Korea is likely to emerge as a regional power, just a notch below China and Japan in productive potential. The future of American forces in Asia will indeed be called into question, but the recent successes of Expeditionary Air Forces in borrowing foreign, even enemy, air bases for US missions, suggests that forward deployment may soon become less relevant, even without significant upgrades in military technology. Although at this distance the future is largely unpredictable, it is clear that this is exactly the timeframe in which issues of historical justice must be addressed. In the spirit of Woodrow Wilson's vision of self-determination, the US should support accelerated reunification for one nation divided into two states by an enmity, the Cold War contest between the USSR and the US, that has now run its course. Endnotes

[\[1\]](#) As Kim Il Sung told Selig Harrison in 1994, "all of this talk of Glasnost and Perestroika deeply alarmed us. We knew it would lead to disaster and to big problems for us, and it did. That man destroyed what it had taken seventy years to build."

[2] NK crude oil imports fell from 3.2 million tons in 1988 to 1.3 in 1993. It would, however, be wrong in accounting for North Korea's economic woes not to mention the crumbling infrastructure, hidebound planned economy stifling all initiative, and repressive security and information regime crushing all critical comment.

[3] And where Pyongyang leads, Seoul and Tokyo are likely to follow. At least, that is the way Moscow and Beijing see it.

[4] I have been told that both variants would draw from the gas reserves in Irkutsk oblast', with one retracing, more or less, the route of the Chinese Eastern Railway (completed in 1903) through NE China to Daqing, the Chinese oil and gas center, before going either through North Korea or under water directly to South Korea. The second variant, a longer and more challenging construction project, would retrace the Amur railway (completed in 1916) to the Korean border. The regions of the Russian Far East are lobbying for this route.

[5] In Moscow, it is hard to get exact information on the state of Russo-Chinese energy cooperation, although the recent admission of China National Petroleum Corporation to the bidding for the Russian government's controlling share in Slavneft might be seen as a step forward. From Irkutsk, it might be clearer how far joint activities have progressed.

[6] The August 1998 NK launch of the Taepodong missile/satellite over Japan is a perfect case in point. A NK unilateral decision immediately pushed Japanese participation in US TMD plans forward, eliciting increased tension with Russia and China over this issue. Even a minor "spoiler" can disrupt accord among the majors.

[7] After Izvestiia published a KGB report on NK from 1990 that concluded that "the first atomic explosive device has been completed," an expert commission of the Russian Duma met in August 1994 and concluded the opposite, though the grounds are vague. Most Russian interlocutors continue to stress the unsubstantiated nature of claims that NK already possesses nuclear weapons.

III. Nautilus Invites Your Responses

The Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network invites your responses to this essay. Please send responses to: napsnet-reply@nautilus.org . Responses will be considered for redistribution to the network only if they include the author's name, affiliation, and explicit consent.

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