Policy Forum 10-024: Russia and the North Korean Knot

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Russia and the North Korean Knot

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I. Introduction

Georgy Toloraya, Director of Korean Programs at the Institute of Economy, Russian Academy of Science, Moscow, writes, "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."

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II. Article by Georgy Toloraya

- "Russia and the North Korean Knot"
By Georgy Toloraya

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 U.S. 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". [1] Along with other countries, 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. I believe the Russian strategy, coordinated through the Six-Party talks, of making the 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, including the US, China, Japan and South Korea.

At present the *basic underlying approach* , which still more or less determines practical policy in Korea for Russian policy makers, 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 their agenda. Russia has no intention of recognizing North Korea as a nuclear state (although that does not change the fact that it obviously possesses nuclear weapons). A 'diplomatic solution' - giving North Korea incentives, first of all security guarantees to make them agree to 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 to rein in the nuclear program 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 also is 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 and its allies. 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.

In late 2008/early 2009, Moscow placed almost equal responsibility on the DPRK and its adversaries for the stalemate at the Six-Party talks, indirectly blaming the US (and sometimes Japan) for dragging its feet on fulfilling its obligations and complicating the peace process. [2] For Russian experts North Korean frustrations were quite understandable -their actual gains from the diplomatic process of 2003-2008 were marginal-they did not come much closer to obtaining substantial security guarantees and received only a part of the modest economic assistance promised when the accord was sealed. Since early 2008 the Lee Myung Bak administration's turn to a hard-line policy

effectively dismantled almost all the achievements of the North-South rapprochement under the "liberal" governments of Kim Dae Jung and Roh Moo Hyun. Russian experts were sympathetic with Pyongyang's view that this was yet another example of the untrustworthiness of the negotiation partners.

However in 2009 Pyongyang's provocative behavior (above all its pursuit of nuclear and long-range missile capabilities) have almost overfilled the cup of the Kremlin's patience and given rise to a less lenient approach to the DPRK's adventurism in the top echelons of power. [3] This new trend can be described as follows. Global interests, including the need to preserve the non-proliferation regime, in the framework of such an approach are more important for Russia 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.

On March 30th, 2010 President Dmitry Medvedev finally signed a decree implementing intensified United Nations Security Council sanctions against Pyongyang's nuclear programs. His strong anti-proliferation stance, displayed in the course of Washington nuclear summit, also promises nothing good to North Korea The presidential decree banned purchase of weapons and relevant materials from the DPRK by government offices, enterprises, banks, organizations and individuals currently under Russia's jurisdiction. It also prohibited the transit of weapons and relevant materials via Russian territory or their export to the DPRK. Any financial aid and educational training that might facilitate Pyongyang's nuclear program and proliferation activities were also forbidden. [4]

The timing - right before Russia and the US concluded the new START treaty and while the DPRK continued its tactic of avoiding denuclearization talks - gave rise to the interpretation that Moscow was signaling a hard-line towards North Korea. Nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation are core issues in the newly developing cooperation between Medvedev and Obama and Russian acceptance of toughness towards the most outrageous of the nuclear proliferators seemed to well suit global Russia's goals.

However this logic is incorrect. There is nothing new in Russian policy in Korea in spring 2010 - the decree itself is retroactive and is implemented as of June 12, 2009 when UNSC resolution 1874 was adopted. Russian internal government machinery has never been fast and it has taken the full baby-bearing term to formally enact the decision. North Koreans seem to understand that, although they will certainly take the opportunity to reprimand Russia yet again.

However, is it really likely that Russia would 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 approach is yet to be fully worked out in Washington. 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 actually 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 an all-out war, and all-out war is actually 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, do constitute possible dangers. But these amount to reasons for Russia to prevent both kinds of developments and to prioritize them over denuclearization. I think that the denuclearization of North Korea without a solid system of collective security in place in the region, could actually increase the military risks in Russia's neighborhood.

What exactly denuclearization means is also 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 the 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 off the nuclear potential for their personal future (which actually 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 have consequences eventually endangering 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 also not be totally discarded. Russia's interest in stopping any such development coincides therefore with those of the US, Japan, and South Korea. But I believe that, 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 United States (on matters including non-proliferation, 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. [5]

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) [6] 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. [7]

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.

III. Citations

[1] Foreign Ministry Dismisses US Nuclear Plan - KCNA, 09.04.2010.

[2] For example, following the DPRK threat to suspend disablement of its nuclear facilities in Yongbyon and consider restoring them to the original state, the Russian Foreign Ministry made a statement on 26 August 2008, saying that this decision evoked disappointment and concern in Moscow and that "all the actions in the denuclearization field by the DPRK should be accompanied by adequate political and economic support - meaning assistance to Pyongyang "- and "steps from the other five members of the talks, while Russia fulfills its obligations timely and fully. We wish all other parties to act the same consistently in good faith." Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov noted in September 2008: "Different from some other members of the Six Party Talks, we are acting

in a team spirit fashion, collectively, as was agreed initially. We try to avoid unilateral steps... The purpose is denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, not solving the bilateral problems of some participants... It would be fruitful if all the members of the Six-Party Talks would fulfill their obligations by the letter of the agreements reached and not file some other requests without consulting other partners. And of course it would be important that all the DPRK's partners in the Six-Party process would actually participate in providing economic assistance to Pyongyang. That, I think, would constitute a package that would enable forward movement" Interview with Minister Sergei Lavrov , Kommersant, August 27, 2008.

[3] The nuclear test of May 25, 2009 caused indignation in the Kremlin, which called it "irresponsible," "absolutely unacceptable" and "unpardonable." President Medvedev himself did not spare harsh words, noting the "personal responsibility" of the "perpetrators of this action." The Russian military - probably acting on orders from above - went as far as to suggest deploying Russia's sophisticated S-400 air defense system in its Far Eastern region to protect against any potential test mishap near the border with the DPRK. After the condemnatory UN Security Council resolution 1874 was adopted, Russia "called on the partners in the DPRK to rightfully accept the will of the international community, expressed in the resolution, denounce nuclear weapons and all the military nuclear-missile programs, return to the NPT, the CTBT and the IAEA safeguards regime, and resume participation in the Six-Party talks aimed at finding a mutually acceptable solution of the current knot of contradictions." Russia also denounced North Korean intentions to proceed to uranium enrichment. However, the Russian Foreign Ministry stuck to its point that the nuclear problem on the Korean Peninsula should be "settled by the political and diplomatic means in the framework of the six-party negotiation process."
Prima Media , 4 June 2009; Agence France Presse, " Russia Deploys Air Defence over N. Korea Missile Tests ," Ulanbator, 26 August 2009; ROSBALT News Agency, 17 July 2009.

[4] Link .

[5] See, for example " A Long-term Strategy for North Korea. "

[6] See Vadim Tkachenko, "Korea and Her Great Neighbour. In: Korean Peninsula", *The Time of New Challenges* - Moscow, Institute of Far Eastern Studies, 2009, p.58

[7] See, for example, Georgy Toloraya. " Continuity and Change in Korea: Challenges for Regional Policy and U.S.-Russia Relations ."

IV. 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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