Policy Forum 11-07: The Russian Perspective on the Korean Peninsula in 2010 and Implications for the Future


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The Russian Perspective on the Korean Peninsula in 2010 and Implications for the Future

by Alexander Vorontsov

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I. Introduction
Alexander Vorontsov, Director of the Department for Korean and Mongolian Studies at the Russian

Academy of Sciences, writes, “We have concluded that the only real, workable method to first halt, then try gradually to limit, and, in the long run, eliminate North Korea’s nuclear programs and capability is for the main players to enter substantive negotiations on the issues as soon as possible. And while we closely monitor Pyongyang’s fulfillment of its obligations, we should not fail to meet our own.”

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II. Article by Alexander Vorontsov
-“The Russian Perspective on the Korean Peninsula in 2010 and Implications for the Future.”
By Alexander Vorontsov
We are forced to admit with dismay and regret that the Korean Peninsula Nuclear Problem (KPNP) in general, and North Korea’s nuclear programs in particular, played themselves out in an intense and unchecked manner in the midst of worsening inter-Korean relations during 2010. At the same time, the mechanisms for resolving, freezing, and eventually eliminating these programs were almost completely inactive. This applies to both the bilateral formats and, especially, to the main international tool designed to meet those goals—the six-party talks.
China’s diplomatic efforts, with Russia’s support, succeeded not only in convincing North Korea to return to the six-party talks by the beginning of the year (and that was the main commitment given to Pyongyang by all participants in the Beijing process throughout 2009 and early 2010), they were also able to develop a realistic plan for a preliminary three-phase way of reconvening the talks: a direct meeting between representatives of the United States and North Korea, an unofficial meeting by the delegations of the six countries and, finally, full-fledged talks in the six-party format.
These proposals by Beijing were “closely studied” in the United States, Japan and the ROK; the response was ambivalent, but a restrained and positive attitude towards them was beginning to emerge nevertheless. However, all of these positive developments collapsed simultaneously because of the tragic sinking of the South Korean corvette Cheonan on March 26, 2010.
The Russian perspective is that the tragedy of the Cheonan and its 46 dead sailors was exaggerated and the incident was given full play in the Western media. The Russian government expressed many questions and doubts about what it saw as the circumstantial evidence used by the official investigation into the cause of the sinking, which included a group of highly qualified Russian naval experts who were invited by South Korea to inspect the wreckage of the vessel. I have to say “circumstantial evidence” because the Russian government provided a report to the leaders of the concerned countries but did not publish the results for political reasons.
However, the fundamental reason (along with many other factors, as always) for the serious crisis on the Korean peninsula during 2010 was the North Korean resistance to the US-ROK alliance. It was not new, of course, but it escalated to a new level of antagonism. Naturally, each of the parties saw different aspects of the crisis as causes of the escalation.
1. The concerns, intentions and strategy of the US-ROK alliance.

Washington and Seoul believe that Pyongyang’s acquisition of nuclear explosive devices and its claim of now having achieved the status of a nuclear state were unacceptable. By their logic, the availability of the “nuclear deterrent” allowed North Korea to act more audaciously, irresponsibly and aggressively in 2010. Such unacceptable actions could have included the destruction of a South Korean warship on March 26 and the November 23rd artillery shelling of the South Korean island of Yeonpyeong in the disputed waters near the Northern Limitation Line (NLL) in the Yellow Sea while

South Korean armed forces were conducting other maneuvers.
It is difficult to judge how serious these concerns are to the strategists in Washington and Seoul. We cannot afford to either underestimate or overestimate their significance. Apparently something else is taken more seriously in the capitals of the United States and the ROK—the continuing and impressive success of North Korea's nuclear programs now based on uranium enrichment technology despite the UN Security Council Resolutions (No. 1784 of 2006 and No. 1874 of 2009). Further progress could transform the DPRK's nuclear potential (which is currently too modest to present a real threat to the United States and its allies, but has already gives that country reason to proudly call it "a national means of nuclear deterrent") into something to be reckoned with in the foreseeable future. In any event, the prominent American nuclear physicist Siegfried Hecker, who has visited North Korea on numerous occasions and to whom they "based on old friendship", was shown a new facility with 2000 operational centrifuges in October 2010. He found both the scale and the technological level of the new nuclear facility, as he put it, "stunning."[1]
Naturally, all of these considerations have been superimposed on the ever increasing concerns deriving from the global obligations of the United States as one of the guarantors of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, the blanket system for non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction as a whole, as well as on the Iranian nuclear issue. Under that system Pyongyang and Tehran are currently seen on Capitol Hill as two sides of the same coin.
That has doubtless greatly intensified the alarm felt by conservatives in the United States, who have always looked upon North Korea as an "intolerable country" with which it is useless to negotiate with.
That trend "happily" coincided with the initial strategic vision of the current ROK administration of Lee Myung-bak to rapidly and decisively (ideally while still in office) push North Korea to the breaking point and unify the two countries on his democratic terms, i.e., simply put, by "absorbing" the North.
In our view, these factors explain the unprecedented, coordinated military pressure that the United States and South Korea placed on Pyongyang in 2010 as well as the categorical unwillingness to use diplomatic means for settling the numerous conflicts (often using the tried-and-true method of proposing terms known to be unacceptable to one's opponent).
Who was the leader and who the follower in this pair is an interesting question. Many have suggested that Seoul was most energetically seeking to punish Pyongyang for unprecedented provocations and use it as a pretext for implementing "regime change." There is a great deal of information, including WikiLeaks cables, showing how persistently high-ranking South Korean diplomats have tried to convince their American counterparts that the North Korean regime is currently very unstable, that Kim Jong-Il's health is critical (much worse than it in fact is), that North Korea's starving and discontented people would meet South Korean and American troops crossing the 38th parallel almost as liberators and, most importantly, that China—Pyongyang's main ally and sponsor—could be convinced under some circumstances to accept all actions to eliminate the DPRK.[2] That is, only one step is needed, but a decisive step—and the cherished dream of regime change in the North would come to pass.
The planners were not in the least disconcerted by the fact that most experts both in South Korea and abroad looked askance at these assessments of the level of instability in North Korea and the state of its relations with China because they were utterly divorced from reality. They apparently believed their analysis to be impeccable, however.
Did Washington believe it? Possibly, to some extent, due to wishful thinking and, perhaps, due to the evolving passivity of their approach to East Asia. Not incidentally, some analysts have even begun speaking of the "Japanization" of US foreign-policy, by which they mean it is becoming more reactive and losing initiative.[3] In our opinion, however, the fact that for more than two years Washington has been pursuing a so-called "strategic patience" policy towards Pyongyang, which a growing number of critics in the US expert community call "doing nothing", suggests that matters are even more serious. "Strategic patience" is a de jure neutral policy towards North Korea and is a de facto

policy of increasing North Korea's isolation in all areas, and that includes rejecting substantive contacts with its representatives. Here, the interests of the allies on the banks of the Potomac and the Han rivers are apparently in full agreement. Washington's widely repeated formal explanation that its unwavering support for all of Seoul's actions is just support for the principle of solidarity with an ally, which not only South Korea but all US allies need to be shown, explains an important aspect of the support, but only part of the issue. Therefore, we believe that the authors of articles in the American press who gave their work titles like "How Long Will the Tail Wag the Dog?"—the tail being South Korea, of course—did not get it quite right.[4] It seems that the interests of the two allies regarding Pyongyang—both strategic and tactical—were in deeper agreement than was previously the case. And possibly it is only out of tactical considerations that Washington has represented Seoul as the more active and proactive player in this gambit.

Of course, we cannot avoid addressing another extremely important factor—the role of China. Throughout 2010, the United States openly clashed with Beijing on a wide range of issues, including North Korea. By increasing pressure on China to unprecedented levels, Washington (together with South Korea) attempted to show Beijing that the price of its support for North Korea is becoming excessively burdensome, and it hoped thereby to break the Chinese away from Pyongyang. It is our assessment that last fall's joint US-ROK naval maneuvers that included an aircraft carrier in the Yellow Sea were primarily aimed at China, even though they were officially conducted as a response to North Korea. Naturally, such actions by Washington with regard to China and North Korea have lent wings to Seoul's hopes and actions, but their wishes have gone unfulfilled. North Korea's domestic political environment remains quite stable, and the friendly relations between China and North Korea "cemented by jointly shed blood" continue to deepen across the board.

Let's now try to make sense of the motives behind North Korea's conduct.

2. North Korea's concerns, perceptions and strategy

Contrary to the widely publicized picture of North Korea as the sole source of problems on the peninsula and as being synonymous with unpredictability, inadequacy, and hostility, in our opinion, the North Korean leadership usually acts in a very pragmatic and prudent manner with a long-term perspective on the possible ways a situation can evolve. This often helps them to outplay their opponents.

We need to pay attention to the following factors for the period we are examining:

a. The crises on the Korean peninsula in 2010, especially the shelling of Yeonpyeong Island on November 23, was generally inconsistent with the DPRK's basic interests and behavior over recent months, which were aimed at building bridges with its main opponents—the United States and South Korea. Expert circles in late summer and early fall began using the term "Pyongyang's peace offensive" to reflect some specific steps taken by North Korea's leaders. They included the agreement to return to the six-party talks, the unprecedented broad invitation to the 65th anniversary celebrations of the founding of the Workers Party of Korea (October 15, 2010) extended to a large group of leading Western media companies (CNN and others), and a series of proposals for renewing the dialogue with Seoul on various issues, including a meeting between members of separated families that was successfully held. The situation during the period we are examining was as following: the North proposed ideas, and the South studied them "closely" but was in no hurry to respond.

b. There is reason to believe that Pyongyang's perceptions (how accurate and appropriate they were is a separate issue, but in any event they are a reality that cannot be ignored) of the goals and actions of its opponents were approximately as follows.

   With the full support of the United States, the administration of South Korean President Lee Myung-bak initiated efforts to implement a regime change policy in Pyongyang. One method used

to increase pressure was to try and exploit crisis situations, sparking international condemnation of North Korea and getting additional sanctions imposed on the DPRK in order to decisively isolate it, "close" it, and thus accelerate its collapse. That strategy was used with the sinking of the frigate Cheonan last March. Despite Seoul's best efforts, however, it was unable to achieve all of its goals in the UN Security Council, partly because proof supporting the South Korean version of the attack was not persuasive enough. However, by accusing Pyongyang of destroying the South Korean warship, Lee Myung-bak burned his bridges with the North and cut off his path of retreat in domestic politics. In any event, he drastically narrowed his room for maneuver in both areas. That is forcing him to risk everything and continue with his chosen course of action. Therefore, the North was not surprised when immediately after the incident he said that he believed normalization of inter-Korean relations was impossible before his term in office expires. There was another crisis on the border with North Korea in November, and attempts were again made to represent it as the aggressor, particularly to international organizations.

As we know, Russia strongly condemned the shelling of Yeonpyeong Island.[5] At the same time we would add the following: The North perceived the Hoguk military exercises that involved missile and artillery firing on its border to be provocative acts. Therefore, North Korea's reaction was entirely predictable under the circumstances, and experts in Seoul should have been able to foresee it.

c. Pyongyang in all likelihood realized that it was now dealing with a revived long-term US and ROK strategy aimed at "squeezing" the North in practice, and that included increasing military pressure. They surmised that Washington and Seoul have already made the decision to change North Korea's regime in the near future through a full-blown military operation, if necessary. Therefore, both the recent incidents and inevitable future military border incidents are part of that strategy.

   Based on that assumption and knowledge of Pyongyang's traditional operational logic ("meet force with more force"), it is not difficult to imagine how North Korea's leaders would react in the evolving situation. They would most likely decide to try and stop the enemy and repel the threat at long range. That is, they would not hesitate to use armed resistance, and in some instances they could preempt it (depending on the situation). In any event, North Korea's political elite are aware that it is a matter of life and death for North Korea and for them personally, and they will be prepared to use all means available in a struggle for survival.

Based on that analysis, we agree with Mr. Jong Seok Lee, one of the most experienced analysts on North Korea, who says that its recent actions are aimed at giving the United States two clear alternatives—either bilateral talks or further development of its nuclear programs. By the same token, South Korea is under pressure to choose between dialogue and conflict.[6]

3. How can the deadlock be resolved?

Summarizing this analysis, the key elements are as follows. Russia, like the other members of the six-party talks, is truly interested in the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula. Russia is also very much alarmed by the continuing unmonitored development of North Korea's nuclear programs.
That gives rise to a natural question: how can the situation be rectified?
In recent months, the ROK President Lee Myung-bak has been repeating statements by US President George W. Bush between 2002 and 2003 almost word for word: "I will never again sit down at the

negotiating table with the North Koreans because that would mean rewarding their bad behavior." Can the deadlock be resolved while holding positions like that? We do not think so.

Many negotiations have been held between the DPRK and its opponents, with the nuclear problem being one of the issues discussed. Many of them ended in fiasco. But perhaps that justifies to some extent Lee Myung-bak's emotional statements immediately after the shelling of Yeonpyeong Island in which he indicated that negotiations with Pyongyang are useless on principle as nothing they have done seems to have had any effect.

History demonstrates otherwise. There have been successful negotiations. In contrast to the NLL in the Yellow Sea, the DMZ was mutually discussed, was agreed to, and it is still recognized by the North.

On the nuclear issue, which is of greater concern to us, the most successful period of strict international monitoring of North Korea's nuclear programs was the seven years that the Agreed Framework signed by the United States and the DPRK in October 1994 was in effect. The KEDO program, with all of the difficulties over the operation of the consortium, gave the world its first successful and rich experience of collaboration between the "irrational, maniacal and untrustworthy North Koreans" and a broad range of Western partners.

Yes, North Korean representatives frequently walked out of the negotiations without fulfilling their obligations. However, an impartial analyst would be forced to admit that their Western partners just as often broke, failed to meet, and tried to repackage or reinterpret their own obligations. That claim is an objective, statistically demonstrable fact.

Returning to North Korea's nuclear programs, the historical evidence again confirms that they were successfully subjected to international monitoring, freezing and even sometimes the reversal of the nuclear programs when North Korea was in negotiations with interested partners and under obligations that they had voluntarily accepted during negotiations with those they recognized as their equals. That was the case until very recently, during periods when the terms of the six-party negotiations in Beijing were successfully implemented.

Of course, those were temporary and partial successes. But, in the first place, they made real progress, and, second, they were better than nothing, certainly better than the unlimited development of North Korea's nuclear capability, which is what we have now.

Currently, Pyongyang legally considers itself free of all obligations. It immediately rejected the UN Security Council's well-known resolutions and international sanctions are not stopping it from moving forward in the nuclear arena.

We are convinced that the plans to force Pyongyang to give up its nuclear programs by squeezing it with sanctions, pressure, and increased isolation are ill-founded and simply do not work. It is when North Korea's leaders are feeling increased military threat from outside that they make the maximum effort to speed up work on strengthening their "nuclear shield" and they are prepared to sacrifice much for its sake, including limiting economic freedom and reforms (in the North Korean understanding of those concepts, of course). This conclusion is supported by the entire historical period we have observed throughout the development of the situation on the Korean peninsula.

We have concluded that the only real, workable method to first halt, then try gradually to limit, and, in the long run, eliminate North Korea's nuclear programs and capability is for the main players to enter substantive negotiations on the issues with it as soon as possible. And while we closely monitor Pyongyang's fulfillment of its obligations, we should not fail to meet our own.

The six-party talk mechanism in Beijing is a perfectly workable tool that has provided a store of solid useful experience. Therefore, it would be extremely desirable to start the talks as soon as possible. However, it naturally would be impossible to exclude the emergence of other international structures to deal with similar problems in the future.

As a final conclusion, we would like to recall a truth that is well known in the non-proliferation community: advancing non-proliferation and regime change policies in partner countries are absolutely incompatible. Anywhere attempts at regime change are staged successful non-proliferation efforts come to an immediate halt.

III. Citations

[1] Siegfried S. Hecker, "A Return Trip to North Korea's Yongbyon Nuclear Complex." NAPSNet Special Report, November 22, 2010

[2] The Guardian, November 29, 2010, reporting on WikiLeaks Cables.

[3] Geun Lee, «Audacity of Hope Deferred: Obama's East Asia Policy," Global Asia, Seoul, Volume 5, # 4, Winter 2010, p. 63-64.

[4] Mike Chinoy, "Is the South Korean Tail Wagging the American Dog?"// http://38north.org/2010/07.

[5] - "On the meeting between Russian Deputy Foreign Minister A. N. Borodavkin and Korean ambassador to Moscow Lee Youn-ho, November 29, 2010, available at: http://www.mid.ru/brp_4.nsf/0/222C81A42396E648C3257715002953F9,
- Statement by the Information and Press Department of Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs regarding the artillery shelling that took place on November 23 between the DPRK and the Republic of Korea, November 23, 2010.

[6] Jong Seok Lee, "The Next Kim: Prospects for Peace in Korea," Global Asia, Seoul, Volume 5, # 4, Winter 2010, p.81.

IV. Nautilus invites your responses

The Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network invites your responses to this essay. Please send responses to: bscott@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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