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Korea in Russia's Post Cold War Regional Political Context

By Dr. Evgeny Bazhanov, Vice President,
Diplomatic Academy (Foreign Ministry of the Russian Federation, Moscow)

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In the 1990s Russia faced Northeast Asia anew, obliged to reconsider Soviet policies due to different domestic considerations and transformed regional conditions. In the early cold war years when China was the obvious priority and Japan was still recalled as the enemy, Korea suddenly assumed a large role in the struggle to reshape the region. The same evolution occurred a half century later. After downplaying Korea's significance for most of the 1990s, Russia recognized its pivotal role as the "sunshine policy" started in 1999-2000 and, even more, when a crisis over nuclear weapons began in 2002-2003. Caught between rapidly rising Chinese power and Japanese power still obsessed with four islands over which Moscow claimed sovereignty, Russians perceived an opening in the flux around both of the Koreas. This paper traces the evolution of Russian approaches from traditional Soviet policies to the initial orientations of the new Russian state, and finally to Vladimir Putin's initial strategy both to the region and to the Korean peninsula.

The Korean War and the Korean nuclear crisis stand as bookends on opposite sides of five decades of limited leverage but active involvement by Moscow in Korean affairs. Leaning completely to the North, Moscow often found that rivalry with Beijing deprived it of the clout necessary to have its way. In the 1990s when Moscow reversed direction and leaned heavily to the South, it again was frustrated by loss of leverage. Since policies toward Korea fit into a broader regional strategy, loss of influence became a factor in relations with all three of the other powers active in Northeast Asia. By the end of the 1990s, Russian leaders were again focusing on ways to become more involved in the struggles over the Korean peninsula in order to shape the evolution of a region.

Traditional Soviet Policies in Northeast Asia and Korea

Three important elements formed the foundation of Stalin's foreign policy after War II: 1) assurance of the USSR's national security; 2) expansion of communism's influence; and 3) great power ambition to augment the territory of the Russian Empire. Combined, these elements provided the driving force behind Moscow's very active, tough and rigid policy. The Moscow-Washington rivalry led to the division of Korea into two states, and the USSR spared no effort to build and strengthen a loyal regime in the North, materially, militarily, politically, and morally.¹ The attitude toward the South, however, was hostile from the beginning, seeing it as a product of "U.S. imperialism," detrimental to the aspirations of the Korean people, and dangerous for socialism, the USSR, and peace in Asia. In 1950, Stalin approved the North's military attack against the South.

After Stalin's death, a new Soviet leadership adjusted its strategy. While adhering to a vision based on a two-dimensional conflict between socialism and capitalism and the notion of unavoidable ideological struggle in international relations, Nikita Khrushchev also emphasized peaceful coexistence with the West. In Korea, this translated into a desire to maintain the status quo. By the start of the 1960s, Soviet policy was becoming even more restrained as ideological and political contradictions developed with the North, which eventually sided with China in the growing Sino-Soviet dispute. Khrushchev came to disfavor Kim Il Sung, concerned that leftist fever that infested Beijing and Pyongyang at the time would set the Far East afire in war.² Yet, he continued to demonstrate a completely hostile attitude towards Seoul in spite of cooling relations with Pyongyang.³

The Brezhnev leadership brought another change in foreign policy. To avoid a second war in Korea, the Kremlin deemed it important to bring Pyongyang back from its newfound relationship with the PRC. North Korea was perceived as a strategic ally, a Far Eastern outpost in the overall picture of the Soviet Union's confrontation with the United States. Military and material aid increased. To win Pyongyang back, Moscow spared no effort to praise all that Kim

¹ Natalia Bazhanova, *Vneshneekonomicheskie svyazi KNDR (DPRK's Foreign Economic Ties)* (Moscow: Vostochnya Literatura), 1992.

² Nikita Khrushchev, *Memuari (Memoirs)* (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnii otnoshenia), 1991, pp. 342-345.

³ *The USSR in Struggle for Peace, International Security, and Disarmament (1946-1977)* (Moscow: Znaniye), 1978, pp. 226, 309, 352-353, 374.

Il Sung was doing. The leadership, in reality, did not admire Kim's personality cult, Pyongyang's Juche (self-reliance) policy, and its behavior in economic relations.⁴

Gradually an understanding that Seoul was winning the economic competition grew among Soviet experts, and South Korea began to be viewed differently from how it was normally portrayed in North Korean propaganda. Still, the South continued to be perceived as an anti-communist state, a strategic springboard of the Pentagon, and a threat to the vital interests of the Soviet Union, "world socialism, and all progressive forces" of the world.⁵ Moscow's fear of further harming its relations with Pyongyang posed an additional obstacle to major readjustments in its policy toward South Korea.⁶

No substantial changes in policy towards the South followed Brezhnev's death under either Yuri Andropov or Konstantin Chernenko. At the same time Moscow and Beijing continued their rivalry for relations with Pyongyang.⁷ Meanwhile, a subdued but growing understanding of the need to rectify policies regarding Korean affairs began to be detected in academic and political circles of Soviet society.⁸ It is difficult to determine how successful this lobbying would have been were it not for Mikhail Gorbachev's advent to power in the spring of 1985 and his efforts to reconstruct Soviet foreign policy.

Gorbachev's Strategy in the World and on the Korean Peninsula

At the 27th Communist Party Congress in 1986, Gorbachev continued to promote the standard thesis on division of the world into two confronting camps, but his speech differed from what had been said on such occasions by his predecessors. He advocated urgently moving international relations from confrontation to cooperation.⁹ Soon "new thinking" sought to overcome the international system of confrontational blocs while emphasizing human over class interests, across-the-board disarmament as an urgent goal, the construction of a common

⁴ Georgi Kim (ed.), *Situazija na Koreiskom poluostrove* (Situation on the Korean Peninsula) (Moscow: Institut Vostokovedenia), 1981, pp. 16, 24, 31, 38.

⁵ Vserossiiskii centr khranenia sovremennikh dokumentov (All-Russian Center for Preservation of Contemporary Documents) (ARCPD), File 8, List 6, units of storage (u.of s.) 262, pp. 32-33.

⁶ ARCPD, File 8, List 6, u.of s. 119, p. 40.

⁷ E. Bazhanov, *Kitai yi vneshnii mir (China and the Outside World)* (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnye otnoshenia, 1990), pp. 301-305.

⁸ *Koreiskya problema (Korean Problem)* (Moscow: CC CPSU), 1984.

⁹ *Materiali 27 s'ezda KPCC (The Twenty-seventh Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union Proceedings)* (Moscow: Politizdat), 1986, pp. 9-11, 19-20.

European community to include former socialist countries, and the creation of a global security system.¹⁰

Moscow withdrew its troops from Afghanistan, agreed to liquidate all medium-range missiles deployed in Asia and unilaterally reduced armed forces in the eastern part of the country by 200,000, while achieving a degree of normalization in relations with Beijing.¹¹ Korea did not yet draw the attention of the new leaders in the Kremlin. Previous approaches to the Korean problem continued.¹²

The process of realistically assessing Soviet policy toward Korea finally began in 1987-1988. Officials became acutely aware that the Korean problem posed a major obstacle to superpower cooperation in the region, establishment of an Asian security system, and Moscow's participation in international economic cooperation.

Settlement of the Korean Issue. The Soviet Union for decades had limited itself solely to open and voracious support for Pyongyang's positions on Korean issues.¹³

In 1987-1988, policy makers finally began serious analysis of the South Korean position and its proposals, finding that they had quite a number of rational elements¹⁴. A shift also occurred in attitudes towards the U.S. military presence in South Korea. Some politicians even argued that U.S. troops played a deterrent role against a flare-up of an uncontrollable conflict between North and South while helping to limit Japanese military expenditures.¹⁵ Unlike in the past, the USSR started to advance its own ideas for a settlement.¹⁶ Untying the Korean knot became an important foreign policy goal.¹⁷

USSR and security in the Far East. Officials expressed a desire to expand political dialogue with the North, and intensify bilateral military cooperation, while increasing the scope of economic aid and contacts in the scientific, cultural, and sports fields.¹⁸ In response to this approach by the Soviet Union, North Korea's leadership took reciprocal measures. Pyongyang

¹⁰ Mikhail Gorbachev, *O glavnyh napravleniyah vnutrennei yi vneshnei politiki* (On Main Directions of Internal and Foreign Policy of the USSR) (Moscow: Politizdat), 1989, pp. 4-8.

¹¹ E. Bazhanov, "Light in the Tunnel," *Vestnik*, No. 9 (1991).

¹² Pravda, October 25, 1986.

¹³ ARCPCD, File 8, List 9, u.of s.253, pp. 18-19.

¹⁴ ARCPCD, File 8, List 9, u.of s.253, pp. 20-22.

¹⁵ ARCPCD, File 8, List 9, u.of s.309, pp. 215.

¹⁶ Pravda, September 18, 1988, p1.

¹⁷ *Materiali seminara po mezhdunarodnim problemam* (Materials of a Seminar on International Problems) (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnye otnoshenia, 1988), pp.302-303.

¹⁸ V. Andreev and V. Osipov, "Druzhiba yi sotrudnichestvo mezdu narodami SSSR yi KNDR" ("Friendship and Cooperation between Peoples of the USSR and the DPRK"), *Problems of the Far East*, No. 4 (1986), pp.26-27.

cooperated with Moscow on its foreign policy initiatives and was receptive to a number of requests made by the Soviets in the military arena. As rapprochement progressed, some cooling occurred in North Korean-Chinese relations.¹⁹ Although publicly reticent, Beijing was trying through private channels to pass to both Moscow and Pyongyang a message suggesting that they should be careful not to damage Chinese interests. The PRC switched its tactics and position, however, as a result of steadily improving Sino-Soviet relations in 1987-88, a progressive reappraisal of the Far East strategic-military picture, and its own unwillingness to carry on the burden of aiding Pyongyang. All attempts to torpedo improving Soviet-North Korean ties ceased.²⁰

By the time Gorbachev went to China in May 1989 to fully normalize relations, there were virtually no traces of competition between the USSR and the PRC over North Korea. As Kim Il Sung contemplated adjustments in response to improved ties between Moscow and Beijing, new problems cropped up in Soviet-North Korean relations as a result of growing differences in the ideological, political and economic spheres. In 1988, the Soviet Union reduced the level of military aid to the North and, after that, rejected all attempts by Pyongyang at reinforcing military cooperation. Additionally, the Kremlin pressured North Korea to accept international controls over its nuclear reactors. Because of ideological differences, it was increasingly difficult for the two countries to cooperate in such spheres as culture, education, and mass media. Another problem was critical articles in the Soviet press about the DPRK's domestic situation. Pyongyang demanded that an end be put to such practices, but Moscow neither could, nor wanted to act.²¹ Both Moscow and Pyongyang were unhappy with the results of their failed economic cooperation and talked of a need for change.²² Moscow stressed that no matter how hard the USSR tried to help its neighbor, it would be difficult for the DPRK to solve its problems until the confrontation and arms race underway on the Korean peninsula ceased and until the North sheds its semi-isolation from business contacts with the majority of the developed countries.²³

¹⁹ O. Davidov and V. Mikheev, "Nekotorii aspekti severokoreiskoi vneshei politiki v svete mezhdunarodnykh otnoshenii na Dalnem Vostoke" ("Some Aspects of North Korean Foreign Policy in the Light of International Relations in the Far East"), *Problems of the Far East*, No. 7 (1987), pp.18-19.

²⁰ *Za Rubezhom*, June 20, 1988, p.9.

²¹ ARCPCD, File 8, List 6, u.of s.153, p.80.

²² See: N. Bazhanova, *Vneshneconomicheskie svyazi KNDR (DPRK's Foreign Economic Ties)*, pp. 10-88.

²³ Natalia Bazhanova, "Nikakich starshih yi mladshich bratiev" ("No Elder and Younger Brothers"), *Pravda*, August 6, 1990, p.6.

Evolution of Gorbachev's Policy toward South Korea. A Politburo document dated May 11, 1986 called for weakening the position of the U.S. in Korea and elevating the Soviet role in settling the Korean issue. This meant changes in Moscow's approach to South Korea, "which was becoming a factor of global, military-strategic balance."²⁴ The real breakthrough came as a result of the Seoul Olympic Games of 1988. Moscow's perceptions of South Korea underwent a complete turnaround due to Seoul's adroit conduct of the Olympic Games.

After the fall of the East European Stalinist regimes, both the Soviet government and the public underwent a profound ideological transformation. North Korea was no longer considered to be an ideologically close country. At the same time, the economic situation severely deteriorated, and Moscow urgently needed and sought South Korean capital, technology, goods, and credits. Yet, the Soviet military opposed any drastic alterations in Moscow's strategy in the Far East. General V. Lobov, a top planner on the General Staff, wrote in the summer of 1988 of the continued and growing threat from the U.S. in the Pacific. He mentioned South Korea as one of the principal "springboards" for potential aggression against the "socialist commonwealth." North Korea was identified as "an important bastion" obstructing "Pentagon schemes."²⁵ Soviet Armed Forces Chief of Staff M. Moiseev almost a year later talked of the necessity to strengthen the USSR-DPRK alliance for the sake of promoting peace and security in the Far East.²⁶ Gorbachev listened to the proponents of establishing diplomatic relations, and he agreed to meet Roh Tae Woo in San Francisco on June 3, 1990 following a visit to Washington.

The San Francisco summit was a complete success from Moscow's point of view²⁷. Roh promised vast economic aid to the faltering Soviet economy, and Koreans urged the Soviet Union to declare official relations quickly as a prerequisite for extending the aid. On September 30 Foreign Minister Shevardnadze met South Korean counterpart in New York. After agreeing to establish official relations, he went out of his way to express good feelings toward Pyongyang. This, however, could not prevent a strong negative reaction.

Relations with South Korea immediately became a priority in the USSR's Asian-Pacific foreign policy. In December 1990 President Roh paid an official visit to the USSR. Negotiations went smoothly and resulting in a "Declaration on General Principles of Relations between the

²⁴ ARPCD, File 8, List 6, u.of s. 205, p.162.

²⁵ V. Lobov, "Kto dobivaetsya prevoshodstva?"("Who is aspiring for superiority?"), *Krasnyia zvezda*, July 14, 1988, p.4.

²⁶ M. Moiseev, "Istochniki napryazhenosti" ("Sources of Tensions") *Pravda*, May 4, 1989, p.5.

²⁷ ARPCD, File 8, List 6, u.of s. 109, p. 17-18.

USSR and Republic of Korea" as well as a number of economic agreements and conventions. Gorbachev called the declaration "an outstanding piece of goodwill and friendship between two sovereign nations," arguing that it opened new vistas for overcoming confrontational mind-sets and liquidating the cold war in the Asia-Pacific region.²⁸ At a meeting with close associates Gorbachev stressed that South Korea was the most promising partner in the East and opportunities there should not be lost.²⁹ Relevant to him was the fact that the Soviet Union and the ROK were both leaving behind totalitarian practices and trying to introduce democracy to their societies.³⁰

Initial Post-Soviet Russia's Policies and Korea

Though the Gorbachev's legacy had a strong impact on the foreign policy of new Russia, its leaders nevertheless tried hard to disassociate themselves from the recent past. Yeltsin's right-hand man State Secretary Gennady Burbulis and Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev in their first appearance before the staff of the former Soviet Ministry of Foreign Affairs in December 1991 categorically denied any connection with Gorbachev³¹. Kozyrev added that democratic Russia was about to initiate "a completely fresh policy of unrestrained partnership and integration with the West."³² Russia conducted a clearly pro-Western policy.³³ The communist states - North Korea, Cuba, and Vietnam - were shocked with the anti-communism of the new Russian leaders and feared that the "democratic fever" could penetrate their own turf. Moscow in its turn consciously stopped all ideological links as well as special relations with these regimes, expecting their early demise. The Kremlin joined Western nations in condemning human rights violations in Cuba and the DPRK. The beginning of relations between the new Russian state and China was not particularly auspicious either.³⁴ At the same time, the new Russian state worked hard to advance political and economic relations with "stable, moderate and economically

²⁸ *Pravda*, December 16, 1990, p.1.

²⁹ *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, April 28, 1991, p.3.

³⁰ *Trud*, April 20, 1991, p.1.

³¹ Evgeny P. Bazhanov, *Aktualnye problemi mezhdunarodnykh otnoshenii*, Tom 1 (Studies in Contemporary International Development, Volume I), (Moscow: Nauchnyia kniga, 2001), p.207.

³² *Moscow News*, January 2, 1992, p.4.

³³ Evgeny Bazhanov, *Evolutsia rossiiskoi vneshnei politiki v 1990e* (Evolution of the Russian Foreign Policy in the 1990s (Moscow: Nauchnyia kniga, 1999), pp.4-6.

³⁴ Evgeny Bazhanov and Natalia Bazhanova, "Russia and Asia in 1992," *Asia Survey*, Vol.33, No 1 (January 1993), pp.91-109.

successful states³⁵ of the Third World, including South Korea, Taiwan and the ASEAN countries.³⁶

By the second half of 1992 South Korea looked like a bright spot in Russia's interactions in the Asia-Pacific. Its companies, interested in Russia's natural resources and its military and space technology, kept a high profile in the Russian market. Some explored opportunities for major investment, and Moscow in turn solicited Korean capital and pressed for resumption of the \$3 billion loan that had been frozen by Seoul after the collapse of the USSR. Finally, Yeltsin succeeded in regaining the loan.³⁷ Moreover, the two sides needed each other politically. The Kremlin played "the Korean card" to put pressure on Japan, and it generally displayed an interest in a greater political role for South Korea in East Asia and, for the future, an interest in unification of the Korean nation. South Korea looked to the Russian connection as a counterbalance to American and Japanese influence in the region and as an instrument for deterring the North.

Yet, bilateral relations soon deteriorated to a certain degree. After Moscow's decision to postpone the payments due on the \$3 billion loan, Seoul newspapers called it "an act of arrogance beyond our understanding and patience." Seoul froze the remaining half of the loan, and the opposition used this opportunity to attack the ruling party for grave mistakes in foreign and economic policy. Russians, in turn, showed displeasure at fluctuations in Seoul's behavior in the economic sphere, unreliability, and the dishonesty of some Korean businessmen. Contention grew over the Russian moratorium on fishing in the central part of the Sea of Okhotsk and its demands to get compensation for the grounds of the old diplomatic mission in Seoul.³⁸

In political relations, the Russian Foreign Ministry in 1993 denounced demands by certain South Korean officials that Moscow renounce military clauses in the Soviet-North Korean alliance treaty of 1961. South Koreans were also bitterly disappointed with the conclusion of a special state committee in Russia that Moscow could not be held responsible for the shooting down of the KAL 007 passenger plane over Sakhalin in 1983. The overall image of Russia in the ROK was further tarnished by the political instability and miserable socioeconomic

³⁵ Anatoly Shutov (ed.), *Diplomaticheskii ezhegodnik-1996* (The Diplomatic Yearbook-1996) (Moscow: Nauchnaya kniga, 1996), pp.12-14.

³⁶ Evgeny Bazhanov, *Evolutsia rossiiskoi vneshnei politiki v 1990e*, pp.8-9.

³⁷ Evgeny Bazhanov and Natasha Bazhanov, "The Evolution of Russian-Korean Relations", *Asia Survey*, Vol. XXXIV, No 9 (September 1993), pp.789-790.

³⁸ Anatoly Torkunov (ed.), *Istoria Korei* (The History of Korea) (Moscow: ROSSPEN, 2003), pp.390-401.

conditions in the Russian Federation, Moscow's weakening international position and its inability to influence North Korean behavior.³⁹

Bilateral problems seemed minor compared to the stormy Moscow-Pyongyang "alliance." The advent of an anti-communist regime in Moscow worsened a deteriorating relationship, as leaders of the democratic movement felt nothing but contempt for communists both inside and outside of Russia, and the DPRK, with its pure Stalinist-type dictatorship, seemed the worst possible case.⁴⁰ No desire existed in the Kremlin to bolster the DPRK economically.⁴¹

The new Russian ideological and political order was not merely alien to North Korean communists but was seen as a source of subversive influence on their own people. Negative feelings were reinforced by a disastrous economic situation caused in part by the cessation of Russian assistance. While continuing to develop ties with the ROK, Moscow ignored political contacts with the DPRK. The Russian Foreign Minister declared that Moscow would stop all military cooperation with the North and put pressure on it to drop its nuclear plans. Yeltsin described the Soviet-North Korean security treaty as existing only on paper, and Information Minister Poltoranin, while in Tokyo, advised the Japanese not to pay war reparations to the DPRK to prevent prolongation of this repressive, obsolete regime.

Pyongyang initially responded in kind but with time it decided to keep channels open with a big neighboring state upon which it still depended in many ways (half of the DPRK's trade volume remained connected to Russia). Besides, the Russian Federation continued to experience internal upheavals, and hopes were rekindled in Pyongyang that the former friend could still come back to its senses. Moscow agreed to restore a working relationship, accepting arguments that expansion of links with Pyongyang was advantageous to everyone, including South Korea. The ability to influence Kim II Sung in the right direction would be welcomed by all.⁴²

By late summer 1992 the Russian Foreign Ministry advocated seeking balanced relations with the South and the North, and that it was important for Russians and Americans to maintain their security arrangements on the peninsula to ensure stability. But these attempts to patch up

³⁹ Evgeny Bazhanov, *Prospects of the General Situation in Northeast Asia and the Korean Peninsula* (Moscow: 1997), pp.11-14.

⁴⁰ Alexander Zadokhin (ed.), *Uchenye zapiski (Academic Notes)* (Moscow: Nauchnaya kniga, 2001), pp.120-130..

⁴¹ Eugene Bazhanov and Natasha Bazhanov, "The Evolution of Russian-Korean Relations", p.792.

differences with Pyongyang and overcome the government's South Korean "tilt" did not succeed. By 1993 Russo-North Korean relations had reassumed an almost hostile character.

In mid-1994 Yeltsin further infuriated Kim II Sung by threatening to support international sanctions against North Korea if it persisted in its attempts to acquire a nuclear weapons capability.⁴³

Factors of Change

Russia's relations with the two Koreas began to change in the mid-1990s due mainly to modifications in policies toward the region as well as the world at large. Reforms were encountering ever-greater difficulties. The public naturally grew bitterly disappointed with liberal democrats and their slogans. More than half of the voters in 1993 and 1995 supported communists and ultra-nationalists in parliamentary elections. Under pressure, Yeltsin had to become more conservative in foreign policy.⁴⁴

Conservative forces were helped by developments in the near vicinity of Russia as well as elsewhere.⁴⁵ In Asia security concerns came to the forefront. Awareness of the potential of renewed hostilities on the Korean Peninsula led Moscow to seek to resume an active role in mediating differences between Seoul and Pyongyang. Such an approach required an improvement of relations with the DPRK and a more balanced policy on the peninsula.⁴⁶

Economic considerations were a second motive for Russia's activities in the Asia-Pacific region. Moscow realized that the success of its modernization program, especially in its less developed eastern provinces, depended on cooperation with neighbors. South Korea continued to figure prominently among prospective partners, and Russia also tried to rely on the ROK in efforts to enter regional economic organizations⁴⁷. In comparison to South Korea, the DPRK was certainly the loser economically in the eyes of Russians.

Still, Moscow recognized that the only way to get North Korean debts was to smooth tensions with the DPRK. It was deemed profitable to continue employing North Korean woodcutters and

⁴² Evgeny Bazhanov, "Russia and North Korea", in: KPF on Record (Seoul: KPF,1996), pp.34-41.

⁴³ Evgeny Bazhanov, "Russia and North Korea", p.40.

⁴⁴ For details see: Evgeny P.Bazhanov, Aktualnye problemi mezhdunarodnyh otnoshenii, Tom 1 (Studies in Comparative International Development. Volume I), pp. 216-219.

⁴⁵ For details see: Evgeny P.Bazhanov, Aktualnye problemi mezhdunarodnyh otnoshenii, Tom 1 (Studies in Comparative International Development. Volume I), pp. 219-225.

⁴⁶ See Valerii Denisov, "Russia on the Korean Peninsula", *Segodnya*, November 4, 1994, p.6.

other workers in the Russian Far East. Deliveries of nuclear reactors to the North and involvement in the development of free economic zones in the border areas were other economic aims. Another argument was that only together with the DPRK would it be possible to realize some large-scale Russian-South Korean projects, such as a gas pipeline from Yakutia to the ROK via the northern part of the Korean peninsula.⁴⁸

Great power ambitions pushed Moscow towards both South and North Korea. It increasingly tried to regain influence and prestige throughout the region. It hoped to forge closer ties with new partners while returning, when possible, to former allies recklessly abandoned earlier.⁴⁹ The ruling elite of Russia no longer abhorred North Korea as it did in the early 1990s. There were even deputies in the Russian Parliament who welcomed the prospect of a nuclear-armed North Korea, seeing in it a contributing factor in the defense of Russia. Kim Dae-jung's election as president of South Korea helped to cement Russia's balanced approach to Korean affairs. Instead of reproaching Moscow for overtures towards Pyongyang, he encouraged rapprochement of the big powers, Russia included, with the DPRK.

Korea's Place in Putin's International Strategy

President Putin in his first year in the Kremlin approved a number of policy documents that confirmed recent foreign policy changes, while pursuing a strategy of open, multi-directional and balanced relations.⁵⁰ Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov said, "The balanced attitude derives from Russia's geopolitical position as the largest Eurasian power, a position which requires an adequate combination of its efforts on all fronts. This approach imposes a responsibility on Russia for guaranteeing world security on both global and regional levels, and it presupposes that it pursue complementary foreign-policy activities in bilateral and multilateral arrangements."⁵¹ The goal remains to secure a prominent role for Russia in the emerging multi-polar world.⁵² The Asia-Pacific region is identified in Putin's doctrine as equally important with the West in the

⁴⁷ Anatoly Tokunov, *Problemi bezopasnosti na Koreiskom poluostrove* (Security Problems on the Korean Peninsula) (Moscow: ROSSPEN, 1995), pp.20-21.

⁴⁸ Evgeny Bazhanov (ed.), *Rossiisko-koreiskii otnoshenia* (Russian-Korean Relations) (Moscow: Nauchnaya kniga, 1997), p.28.

⁴⁹ Nicolai Stepanov, *Korea na pravilnom puti* ("The DPRK is on the Right Track"), *Pravda*, September 6, 1996, p.6.

⁵⁰ Vladimir Putin, *Koncepcia vneshnei politiki Rossiiskoi Federatsii* (The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation) (Moscow: Diplomaticheskii Vestnik, July 2000), pp. 4-16.

⁵¹ *Diplomaticheskii Vestnik*, July, 2000, pp. 9-10.

pursuit of the Russia's goals on both home and external fronts. Moscow places special importance on the development of close ties with China and Japan as well as on the settlement on the Korean peninsula by becoming an active and equal participant in the solution through even-handedly cooperating with both Korean states and with world powers there.⁵³

Initially, the balanced quality of Putin's strategy was not easily detected. The misgivings and wide skepticism of the West towards Russia coupled with growing assertiveness and aggressiveness of the Western alliance, especially of the U.S., alienated Moscow and induced it to compensate with achievements in the East. Putin tried to lure the Bush administration to intensify cooperation on arms control, security arrangements in Europe, anti-terrorism (concerning Chechnya), but to no avail.

At the same time China and to a lesser degree Japan were responsive to Moscow's overtures. Security as well as economic concerns in Northeast Asia led the Kremlin to more vigorous diplomacy on the Korean peninsula with the following goals: 1) to ease military confrontation and tensions in Korea, making sure that a new war does not erupt there;⁵⁴ 2) to prevent the spread of mass destruction weapons (MDW) on the peninsula which will almost certainly undermine stability and produce a nuclear arms race in the Asia-Pacific region;⁵⁵ 3) to activate the Korean factor for the benefit of Russia's economy, especially modernization of its Far East;⁵⁶ and 4) to restore Russian influence on the peninsula and to strengthen Moscow's positions in Northeast Asia as a whole. One feature of the new drive was a radical improvement of damaged Russo-North Korean relations with the expectation that it would help Pyongyang to feel more secure and subsequently to become less obnoxious, more flexible and forthcoming in dealings with Seoul and the outside world. It would allow Russia to further influence North Korea's national security policies, including its activities in the nuclear field.⁵⁷

⁵² Evgeny Bazhanov, *Prioriteti Rossii v menyaushemsia mire* (Russia's Priorities in the Changing World) (Moscow, Nauchnaya kniga, 2000), pp. 16-18.

⁵³ Igor Ivanov, *Novaya rossiiskaya diplomatia* (The New Russian Diplomacy) (Moscow: OLMA-PRESS, 2002), pp. 158-159.

⁵⁴ *Rossiya yi mezhkoreiskii otnoshenia* (Russia and InterKorean Relations) (Moscow: Fond Gorbacheva, 2003), p.41.

⁵⁵ See views of influential Russian experts on the issue in: James Clay Moltz and Alexander V. Mansurov (ed.), *The North Korean Nuclear Program* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

⁵⁶ For arguments on this account see: Vladimir F. Lee, "Russia's Far East in Contemporary Russia-Korean Relations", in: *Politics and Economies in the Russia Far East*, ed. Tsuneo Akaha (New York: Routledge, 1997), pp.198-207.

⁵⁷ *4ii Rossiisko-koreiskii forum* (the 4th Russian-Korean Forum) (Moscow: Nauchnaya kniga, 2002), pp.15-19, 23-25.

With regard to economic issues, Russia became disillusioned with mediocre results of cooperation with South Korea. Trade and especially investment were much lower than originally anticipated. The idea was advanced that if Russia could induce the DPRK to restore transportation links with the ROK and extend them into the Russian Far East, it could bring Russia rich economic benefits. Russian companies, it was believed, might also fit into other multinational economic projects involving both Koreas and others in the region.⁵⁸ Of interest too was recovery of the debt accumulated in the Soviet era, and greater participation of North Korean workers in Russia's economy.⁵⁹

Many argued that loss of leverage over the DPRK had led to loss of prestige in South Korea, weakening Moscow's position in a settlement on the Korean peninsula and in Northeast Asia as a whole. Losing the North Korean connection, it was claimed that Russia ceased to be a major player in the region and was pushed aside by Americans and Chinese.⁶⁰ A real rapprochement between Russia and North Korea began in 2000. The two sides finally concluded the new treaty, which replaced the 1961 one and laid a basis for a normal state-to-state relationship between Moscow and Pyongyang. On July 19-20, 2002 Putin made an official visit to the DPRK, the first ever by a Russian or Soviet leader and coming just as Kim Jong-il chose to open up his country to a certain extent.

The DPRK had plunged into a chronic economic and social crisis, which could be solved only through an open door policy and internal reforms. Rapprochement with the ROK promised to give the North access to finances, technologies, and goods and help in obtaining diplomatic recognition and various concessions from the USA as well as attract large-scale economic aid from the entire West. The accommodation on the peninsula had to strengthen the DPRK's security, which was increasingly difficult to maintain because of economic weakness and expanding military preparations by Washington and its allies.

The inter-Korean détente was very important to the Kim Jong-il's regime internally. Decision to reverse the passive foreign policy and to make a bold step of meeting ROK's president at once woke up the North Korean establishment and the entire society. A long-forgotten air of excitement reappeared in the DPRK. Such expectations were reinforced by other

⁵⁸ Anatoly Shutov (ed.), *Nauchnii zapiski (The Academic Papers)* (Moscow: Nauchnaya kniga, 2003), pp.20-23.

⁵⁹ Anatoly Shutov (ed.), *Nauchnii zapiski*, p.24.

⁶⁰ Anatoly Shutov (ed.), *Nauchnii zapiski*, p.26.

fresh initiatives on the part of the supreme leader: his first foreign trip to the PRC, resumption of active exchanges with Russia.⁶¹

While in the North Korean capital Putin and Kim signed a joint declaration. The Russian side agreed to believe that North Korea's missile programs were purely peaceful and subsequently not threatening to anyone.⁶² The visit put an end to the remaining tensions in Moscow-Pyongyang relations. The two sides showed readiness to open a new chapter in their interactions erasing mutual complaints and offences. Russia and the DPRK agreed to actively promote exchanges in commercial, economic, scientific, and technological fields. Moscow declared its eagerness to become a principal mediator between the North and the South, helping political détente and agitating for economic cooperation including both Koreas as well as Russia. Putin energetically championed three-way economic projects, especially modernization and utilization of the inter-Korean railway connecting it with the Russian Far East and the Trans-Siberian Railroad.⁶³

Putin's visit to the DPRK sent a signal to the U.S. and other players in the Northeast Asia politics of Moscow's intention to be present in Korea, to influence the course of political and military events there and to compete with others in the economic sphere. "Russia showed that it was getting serious about developing its eastern lands and that with the help of the Korean connection it could score first practical results."⁶⁴

Improvement in bilateral ties was solidified by a return visit of Kim to Russia in August 2001, which brought concrete results, although Russian media and society as a whole were disgusted with the pomp, security arrangements and other oddities connected with Kim's prolonged train travel across Russia.⁶⁵ A declaration, signed by Putin and "the great leader," confirmed the convergence in their positions on preservation of the 1972 ABM Treaty and promotion of global security. Kim reiterated the peaceful nature of the North Korean missile program and a moratorium to 2003 on ballistic missile tests.⁶⁶

Unhappy at that time with Bush's policies, Moscow bent under Pyongyang's pressure and accepted in the Declaration: "The DPRK explained its position that withdrawal of American

⁶¹Anatoly Shutov (ed.), *Nauchnii zapiski*, p.27.

⁶²*Diplomaticheskii Vestnik*, July 2000, pp.62-63.

⁶³*Diplomaticheskii Vestnik*, July 2000, pp.65-66.

⁶⁴Evgeny Bazhanov (ed.), *Koreiskii faktor (The Korean Factor)* (Moscow: Nauchnaya kniga, 2003), pp. 23-24.

⁶⁵*Itogi*, August (2001), pp.18-19.

⁶⁶*Diplomaticheskii Vestnik*, August 2001, pp.58-59.

troops from South Korea presents a pressing important problem in the interest of providing peace and security on the Korean peninsula and in the Northeast Asia.”⁶⁷

While courting Pyongyang, Moscow continued to cooperate with Seoul in political, military, and economic areas. On May 27-30, 1999 South Korean President Kim Dae-jung paid a state visit to Russia. During negotiations Yeltsin agreed to express support for the sunshine policy toward the DPRK.⁶⁸ A serious spy scandal between the two countries was also settled. Emphasis was, however, put on promoting economic ties.

Next year at the UN Millennium Summit Putin enthusiastically supported the inter-Korean dialogue and as a way to achieve its success economic cooperation among the two Koreas and Russia. This clearly showed that he was interested in both stability on the Korean peninsula and a Korean role in economic development in Russia's Far East.

The Moscow-Seoul top-level dialogue continued during Putin's visit to the ROK in February 2001. While repeating previous positions on the sunshine policy and triangle economic cooperation Putin emphasized security concerns provoked by Washington's NMD plans and convinced Kim Dae-jung to subscribe to the Russian view that the ABM treaty was a cornerstone of strategic stability.⁶⁹ After all, NMD jeopardized Kim's sunshine policy. If Kim later backpedaled, the fact remained that Moscow-Seoul mutual relations were marked by growing military cooperation: exchange of high-level visits, joint exercises, defense policy consultations, arms sales, etc.⁷⁰

Important too were joint economic plans of the two countries. On many occasions representatives of Russia and South Korea discussed and finally agreed to establish a Korean industrial complex in the Nakhodka Free Economic Zone. Moscow hoped to speed up economic revival of the entire Far Eastern region, and for Seoul it could become a base for economic ties to the rest of Russia as well as the Central Asian states.⁷¹

Russia was very active as a mediator. Putin on a number of occasions conveyed Pyongyang's messages to the West and Seoul, adding his own positive appraisals of Kim Jong-il and North Korea's intentions.⁷² Russia was clearly aiming at raising its regional prestige and

⁶⁷ *Diplomaticeskii Vestnik*, August 2001, p.59.

⁶⁸ *Rossiiskaya gazetta*, May 20, 1999, p.3.

⁶⁹ *ITAR-TASS*, March 1, 2001.

⁷⁰ Valery Denisov, "Rossiiskaya Federaciya – Respublika Korea: partnerstvo prodvigaetca?" ("Russian Federation – Republic of Korea: Partnership Progresses"), in *Diplomaticeskii ezhegodnik – 2001, 2001*, ed. Yury Fokine (Moscow: Nauchnyy kniga, 2001), pp.280-285.

⁷¹ Evgeny Bazhanov (ed.), *Koreiskii faktor*, p.30-31.

⁷² Evgeny Bazhanov (ed.), *Koreiskii faktor*, p.32.

influence by becoming the most valuable intermediary between the North and the South. Emphasis was put not only on warm personal relations of Putin and Kim Jong-il but on the potential for regional economic cooperation with a valuable Russian contribution. Moscow advocated trilateral cooperation combining Russian technologies, North Korean workers and South Korean investments, but reconstruction of Soviet-built factories in the DPRK did not find a positive response from South Korea. Seoul argued that products of these factories would not be competitive in the world market and that the factories themselves had to be demolished as totally obsolete.⁷³

Another Russian idea had a much better reception – the one concerning restoration of the inter-Korean railway and its link with Trans-Siberian Railroad (TSR). Following intense Russian lobbying on this account two schemes came under scrutiny: the first one regarding a line via China and Mongolia, the second one via Siberia. Russia obviously championed the second route describing it as a great contribution to the economic development of the entire Northeast Asia.⁷⁴ Russian experts estimated that the opening of the new transportation route would allow all regional states to save tremendous amounts of money and time while shipping goods to Europe.⁷⁵

Detailed negotiations were devoted to gas pipelines from Russia to the two Koreas. Early in the 1990s an agreement was reached to build a 6,600 km natural gas pipeline from Yakutia to the Korean peninsula before Seoul decided the project would be unprofitable. The focus of attention switched to the Kovyktinski gas field in the Irkutsk region. As estimated, the gas field will be able to supply up to 20 million tons of gas to Russia, two Koreas and China for 30 years after completion. That would cover half of all energy requirements of the DPRK and the ROK at a price one-quarter lower than today.⁷⁶

It should be noted, however, that certain political constraints on multinational projects in the Far East exist from the Russian side. In the early 1990s Moscow and Beijing began intensive preparations for the establishment of a special economic zone on Tumen river with participation of Russia, China, two Koreas and Japan. Hopes were expressed that the zone would grow into a “new Hong Kong” relying on Russian natural resources, Chinese and North Korean labor,

⁷³ Kang Won Sik, *Rossia yi Korea (Russia and Korea)* (Moscow: Koros, 2002), pp.205-208.

⁷⁴ Vladimir Lee (ed.), *Povorotnii moment v Koree (Turning Point in Korea)* (Moscow: Nauchnyia kniga, 2001), pp.12-14.

⁷⁵ FBIS, DR/EAS (2000-0918).

⁷⁶ Vladimir Lee (ed.), *Povorotnii moment v Koree*, pp.17-18.

Japanese and South Korean finances and technology.⁷⁷ While economists in Moscow energetically lobbied for the project, representatives of the Primorskii krai passionately opposed it, fearing the presence of large numbers of Chinese on Russian territory and suspecting that Beijing was deliberately causing a demographic expansion with the ultimate purpose of annexing these lands.⁷⁸ It was argued that the Tumen river zone “would drastically change the ethnic composition, undermine the economic and political interests of the Russian Federation, inevitably leading to chaos and loss of Primorskii krai’s Russian essence.”⁷⁹

As a result of such vehement resistance Moscow put the Tumen project aside. Another project, the Japan sea ring, is equally controversial. Though it opens possibilities for attracting large-scale investments and integrating the Russian Far East into regional economic systems, residents of Far East reject the idea. They claim that the project will “stimulate an influx of Chinese nationals, conserve the irrational structure of local industries (with an emphasis on raw materials), destroy ecology and decrease cargo lines through Siberia to the European part of Russia.”⁸⁰

Escalation of the Chinese presence in the sparsely populated, economically weak regions of eastern Russia will continue to be resisted. At the same time Korean participation in economic activities in Russia does not raise doubts, creating a sense of optimism about prospects especially after unification of Korea.

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The September 11, 2001 terrorist attack on the U.S. led to the significant changes in Russo-American relations, which influenced Moscow’s overall international strategy. North Korea as well as regional politics in the Northeast Asia as a whole went momentarily to the sidelines of Moscow’s priorities. Russia concentrated on promotion of the renewed partnership with the U.S., especially in the anti-terrorist field, and paid less attention to pleasing Pyongyang. Toughening of the U.S. attitude towards the “axis of evil” member, the DPRK, further cooled Moscow’s attitude towards the North.

⁷⁷ Vladimir Lee (ed.), *Povorotnii moment v Koree*, pp.20-21.

⁷⁸ Vladimir Myasnikov, *Dogovornimi statiami podtverdili* (Treaty Statures Confirmed) (Moscow: IDV, 1996), pp.412-413, 418-419.

⁷⁹ Ludmila Zabrovskaya, *Proekt Tumangan* (The Tumangan Project) (Moscow: IDV,1993), pp.100-110.

⁸⁰ Evgeny P. Bazhanov, *Aktualnye problemi mezhdunarodnyh otnoshenii*, Tom 3 (Studies in Contemporary International Development, Volume 3), (Moscow: Nauchnaya kniga, 2002), pp.242-243.

The new crisis between Pyongyang and Washington, which broke out in 2003, again put Korean peninsula in the focus of attention of the Kremlin. In its view the crisis was due to blunders and intransigence of both sides, intensified by the war in Iraq. North Korean leadership became really scared that their country would be the next target of the USA and decided to protect itself by both real and propagandistic provocative moves in the nuclear field. Washington responded harshly and situation in Korea deteriorated to a very dangerous degree.

The Korean peninsula turned in the Russian eyes into a source of an imminent war in the Far Eastern region. In July 2003 the Kremlin ordered local authorities in the areas adjacent to North Korea to check the facilities of civil defense “in connection with the aggravating situation on the Korean peninsula”.⁸¹ In August war games were conducted jointly by Russian Ministries of Defense, Interior and Emergency situations as well as Federal Security Service.⁸² It was estimated that if the USA attacked the DPRK before the end of summer, Russia’s Far East might be hit by a radioactive cloud.⁸³ Another expectations was an influx of large number of North Korean refugees into Russian territory.⁸⁴

Officials became deeply worried that a military operation against the North would lead to an uncontrollable, unpredictable development of events. A prolonged warfare with utilization of nuclear weapons and participation of big powers was not ruled out. As it was argued, “there was plenty of evidence in the history of mankind when theoretically quick, easy military campaigns turned into nightmares for everyone, even for those who initially did not have anything to do with the conflict”.⁸⁵

This argument was advanced by the Kremlin against the war in addition to such arguments as absence of aggressive designs on the part of Kim Chong-il’s leadership and necessity to observe international law. Instead Russia championed and continues to champion a peaceful solution to the current crisis: North Korean strict compliance with the non-proliferation regime in exchange for explicit US security guarantees.

Moscow feels that it would be rather difficult to convince the two sides to agree to such an outcome, but Russian leadership does not see an alternative to this course. Achieving a

⁸¹ Nezavisimya gazetta, July 22, 2003, p.1.

⁸² Kommersant-Daily, August 29, 2003, p.1.

⁸³ Izvestia, July 24, 2003, p.3.

⁸⁴ Rossiiskya gazetta, July 24, 2003, p.4

positive resolution of the crisis constitutes now and in the immediate future the major and in fact sole regional goal of Russia as far as Korea is concerned.⁸⁶ When peace is strengthened then Moscow will be anxious to return to the promising commercially and useful politically multinational economic projects involving two Koreas, Russia, possibly China and Japan, especially restoration of the inter-Korean railway and its link with Trans-Siberian Railroad.

Balance of power configurations in Korea and their impact on Northeast Asia as a whole do not concern Russian strategic planners at this moment.

September 27, 2003

⁸⁵ Svetlana Dolgoplova, "Kim Chen Ir razigrivaet yadernuyu kartu" ("Kim Chong-il plays a nuclear card"), *Smysl*, № 13 (1-15 September 2003), p.8.

⁸⁶ Kim Young-sae. "3-Party Talks are a Symbol". *JoongAng Daily*, August 7, 2003, p.3. An interview with the Russian Ambassador to South Korea.