

Russia's Vision of Re-unified Korea's Place in the Northeast Asian Security System

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Abstract

This paper will examine Russia's policy concerning Korea's re-unification and Moscow's likely responses to possible results of the unification process as a major and necessary element of peace-building in Northeast Asia. Since the middle of the 19th century Russia has had a keen interest in the situation on the Korean peninsula. History repeatedly proved that any aggravation of the situation on the peninsula caused serious concerns and made Russia to take additional steps to ensure her security. So both for security reasons and for smooth development of her Far Eastern region, Russia is vitally interested in maintaining peace and stability on the Korean peninsula. Emergence of the re-unified Korea, however, is likely to create a new situation in the region and make Russia to re-evaluate her policy in Northeast Asia. It is generally accepted notion that Russia will benefit, first of all, from liquidation of a long-time hot spot right next to her Far Eastern region and from founding the re-unified Korea, which is supposedly will maintain relations of friendship, good-neighborhood and cooperation with Russia and other neighboring states. Meanwhile, at the moment, better relations between North and South Korea, along with providing Russia with more favorable conditions for development of trade and economic cooperation with both parts of Korea, would also open new opportunities for economic development of the Russian Far East and for linking Russia's economy to globalization and integration processes in the Asia-Pacific region. So both on security and economic reasons Moscow is vitally interested in reconciliation between North and South Korea and eventual emergence of a peaceful and neutral Korea.

Key words: Korean peninsula, security, unification, peace mechanism, neutralization of Korea

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1. Russia and Korean Re-unification

Though the top leaders of the DPRK and the ROK failed to make their trips to Moscow to take part in the Victory Day celebration on May 9, 2015, by inviting both of them Russia has provided the North and the South with unique chance to hold the third inter-Korean summit in order to improve relations between two parts of the country severely damaged by armed incidents, propaganda wars and long-time suspicions.

The results of two previous inter-Korean summits of 2000 and 2007 were welcomed in Russia because of two major considerations: Moscow hoped that an inter-Korean reconciliation, firstly, will remove a threat of a military conflict right next to her Eastern borders and secondly, create more favorable environment both for development of her bilateral economic ties with two Korean states as well as for implementation of multilateral economic projects with Russia's participation in Northeast Asia. There are expectations that in the long run the re-unified Korea will be a country capable to maintain relations of friendship, good neighborhood and cooperation with Russia.

Traditionally, Russia's priority interest concerning realization of any unification scenario remains maintenance of peace and stability on the peninsula. Russian President Vladimir Putin gave a quite elaborate explanation of Moscow's position in interview with KBS on the eve of his state visit to South Korea in November 2013. "We definitely support the aspiration of Koreans for national unification. It's a natural process. However, I take as point of departure that it should be exclusively peaceful and take into account the interests of the North, as well as of the South. Nothing ... should be imposed on partners, otherwise the process will become destructive instead of having a positive outcome," Putin said, adding "I'd like to repeat that we'll support an exclusively peaceful process, we'll support exclusively those means, which in our modern and civilized world lead to a positive outcome instead of conflicts, tragedies and destruction."

Russia was always anxious about final results of the re-unification process. High degree of uncertainty concerning character of foreign policy of the unified Korea, its participation in the military-political alliances with other states and orientations

of such alliances compels Russia, as well as other powers, while welcoming inter-Korean détente, to take more cautious position toward prospects of unification.

A similar approach was employed by other major parties concerned. For example, Beijing seemingly fears advancement of the U.S. troops to almost 1400 km-long the Korean-Chinese border. China is unlikely to accept the re-unified Korea to be a part of the U.S.A.'s "hedging strategy" against China. The United States is worried by prospects that unified Korea may be inclined to put an end to the American military presence on the peninsula, and the Japanese are seemingly afraid of emergence of a strong competitor overwhelmed with aspiration to get a historical revenge for humiliations of the colonial past.

Russia and China are hardly to welcome as a new neighbor, a state with 75-million population which is under prevailing influence of the U.S.A. and the more so with the U.S. troops on its territory. It would be equivalent to emergence near our eastern borders of an Asian clone of the NATO.

A number of prominent Russian experts consider that the continuing U.S. troops' stationing in South Korea is anachronism of the "Cold War" period. They believe it is necessary to put an end to a foreign military presence in Korea after her possible re-unification since it can be directed only against Russia (and her strategic partner - China). Moscow also keeps in mind that the U.S. troops on the Korean peninsula will be protected by THAAD system which is being deployed by the U.S.A. in the region.

Some Russian experts call for disbandment of the UN Command in Korea which was usurped by the U.S.A. for covering up the American power politics on the peninsula. The move wouldn't destabilize the situation on the peninsula since the U.S. troops almost for certain will stay there on the basis of the bilateral treaty with the ROK. However, the UN Command dissolution and termination of foreign military presence in the re-unified Korea will suit not only Russia's security interests, but also core national interests of all Koreans.

The neighboring states are also worried by possible territorial claims by the unified Korea to the neighboring states. The rather heated Korean-Chinese dispute over borders and history of ancient Korean state of Koguryo has brought close attention to the future developments on the matter.

History testifies that from the very beginning (the middle of the 19th century) the genuine task for Russia's foreign policy has been not to get prevailing positions on the Korean peninsula, but to prevent such a situation when Korea would be placed under influence of another, especially unfriendly to Russia, state.

But under present balance of forces in Northeast Asia one could not exclude development of events according to such a scenario completely, existence of the DPRK as the friendly sovereign state which is carrying out a role of a certain buffer for the U.S. strategy in this region is favorable to Moscow (and Beijing, too) in a short and mid-term perspective.

Therefore, it is plausible to suggest North Korea's unification formula which calls for creation of a neutral non-aligned state on the peninsula looks, from the point of view of Russia's security interests, more attractive, than South Korean commitment to the American military presence even after unification of Korea.

The Korean settlement is among of the most complicated problems in Asia and thus demands unrelenting efforts. Moscow is not imposing itself as an intermediary between Seoul and Pyongyang, but uses all opportunities to promote peace and dialogue between the North and the South. Russia aspires to play on the peninsula a constructive, stabilizing role contradicting to nobody's interests.

Russia's firm conviction is that there is no alternative to the inter-Korean dialogue and cooperation. Moscow never failed to confirm that "Russia supports the policy of developing dialogue between the two Korean states and bringing them closer together" and that "Russia has always aspired to, and today expresses its unequivocal support for, a dialogue and rapprochement of the Korean states and maintaining a denuclearized Korean peninsula." These statements, made by President Vladimir Putin as early as in 2005 were fully reconfirmed during his visit to the Republic of Korea in November of 2013.

Normalization of situation on the Korean peninsula completely suits Russia's national interests. And in particular, because tension arising from time to time between Pyongyang and Seoul obviously does not promote realization of such joint economic projects, like oil and gas pipelines, linking the Russian Trans-Siberian Mainline with the Trans-Korean railways. Russia believes that cooperation in a tripartite format, between Russia, the Republic of Korea and the Democratic

People's Republic of Korea, in the energy and transportation sectors can be a very important part of expanding bilateral cooperation between Moscow and Seoul.

Improvement of relations between the DPRK and the ROK, along with providing with more favorable conditions for development of trade and economic cooperation between Russia and both parts of Korea, undoubtedly, would open new opportunities for economic development of the Russian Far East and for linking its economy to integration processes in the Asia-Pacific region. Along with economic benefits, such interaction is highly likely to contribute to the confidence-building between South and North Korea. Russia believes that such cooperation "will not only be economically advantageous, but will also increase trust on the Korean peninsula."

Russia's security and economic interests make it vitally interested in peace, reconciliation and unification of Korea. As President Vladimir Putin put it: "This process can be very fruitful, constructive and bring great and positive results for the international politics, ensuring security in the region, as well as for the economics of the rapidly developing region. Such process is positive for Russia."

This well-grounded conclusion seems especially important in view of continuing attempts by some experts to convince public opinion that none of the neighboring countries, including Russia, is interested in Korea unification. Such attempts are aimed at placating some countries' egoistic, arrogant policy and disguise their attempts to keep their military dominance in the region at any price.

2. Northeast Asia: In Search for a New Security Architecture

Convocation in August of 2003 of the Six-Party Talks on the Korean peninsula's nuclear problem gave birth to an idea to utilize the forum as a groundwork for a multilateral security mechanism in Northeast Asia which is one among few world's regions remaining short of such an organization.

However, because of the on-going suspension of the negotiating process since 2009 (the current brake-up lasts more than seven years), hopes expressed by some experts at turning the Six-Party format (even without Pyongyang's presence) into

some kind of a regional mechanism for security and cooperation have almost vanished.

Advocates of the idea insisted that along with the nuclear problem and such traditional agenda issues like conventional armaments control and reduction, confidence-building measures, the new organization can respond to a set of new challenges and threats, in particular to prevent acts of terrorism and ensuring environmental security, coordinate joint efforts to cope with consequences of natural calamities and technological disasters, etc.

However, the 21st century's experience demonstrated that new challenges and threats in Northeast Asia proved not to be so urgent as in other regions of the world. One can see that those problems failed to become a top priority on the agenda of both multilateral and bilateral meetings of the leaders of the NEA countries.

Traditional security threats, aggravated by history and territorial disputes remain at the core of the region's diplomatic discourse. In particular, history of the Korean settlement for the last 25 years, including time and again encountered difficulties in solving the nuclear issue on the Korean peninsula, makes us to conclude that without solution of a certain fundamental problem, directly related to the region's future security architecture as a whole, we will continue incessantly stumble on minor problems and will not be capable to tackle them.

The basic, key issue which any future peace process in Northeast Asia should address to is finding an acceptable for four "big countries" – the U.S.A., China, Japan and Russia - place for the unified Korea in the future regional security system. Short of such an agreement each and every participant of any forthcoming peace system will remain very suspicious about other parties' plans and moves.

Some politicians and experts in the U.S.A., the ROK and Japan have already listed the re-unified Korea as a member of the tripartite military-political alliance of U.S.A.-Japan-ROK, to which Australia has been already linked by a number of agreements with the ROK and Japan.

No doubt, such vision is unlikely to be welcomed in Moscow and Beijing. Both countries are likely to perceive such a triangle as a deterrent against Russia and China. Such an alliance would be tantamount to the emergence on Russia's borders

in East Asia of a body similar to NATO in Europe. The more so that the new block will be protected by TMD system which is actively deployed by the U.S.A. and their allies in the region.

Attempts to use a future unified Korea as a de-facto a forward base of maritime powers - the United States and Japan - against continental - China and Russia can hamper and is already hindering both the establishment of a comprehensive and sustainable peace system in Northeast Asia, the solution of the nuclear problem and the re-unification of Korea.

History should have taught the Koreans that having friendship with any of the great powers against other one (or others) will not bring peace and tranquility to the Korean soil, and certainly will not bring closer the day of re-unification.

It is a well-known fact that the security in East Asia after the end of the Korean War was based and still is founded on bilateral military-political alliances. Many American experts believe that any future peace regime and new security mechanism in NEA should not "put at risk" the existing U.S. alliances with Japan and South Korea which are expected to remain the foundation the United States' strong position in NEA.

Thus, any future peace and security mechanism in Northeast Asia is actually viewed by them as a kind of a "supplement" to bilateral military-political alliances existing since the beginning of "the Cold War." That kind of multilateral bodies will be assigned with two main tasks - consolidating and legitimizing the American military and political domination in the region and extending American control over the policies of those countries that have not yet been linked by the bilateral alliances with the United States.

Regretfully, starting from U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's speech made on January 12, 2010 in Honolulu, Hawaii, where she de-facto presented Obama administration's policy toward the Asia-Pacific, a number of follow-up statements by U.S. officials confirmed that the U.S.A. will continue to rely on their bilateral alliances in the region as "the cornerstone" of American involvement and leadership.

America's intention to continue to rely primarily on their bilateral military and political alliances with some countries in the region, rather than on multilateral

mechanisms for the maintenance of peace and security constitutes and, apparently, in the foreseeable future, will remain a major obstacle to the establishment of an effective mechanism for security and cooperation in NEA. Particularly destructive are the U.S. attempts to use such alliances and new block combinations of different configurations to deter a peaceful rise of China, and Russia, too.

It is hard to deny that the division of Korea remains one of the worst legacies of “the Cold War.” However, virtually all experts and policymakers tend to limit their calls for elimination of this heritage to the need to achieve the desirable for the United States and its allies changes in foreign and domestic policy of the DPRK, or even better – to realize a regime change scenario in that country.

On the other side, are not the same legacy of “the Cold War” the U.S. military alliances with Japan and ROK? More than 25 years have elapsed since the West announced its victory in the “Cold War,” but these alliances are far from been dissolved. On the contrary, one can witness incessant attempts to have them strengthened and enlarged.

Russia has long ago abrogated military alliances with countries in the region, Russian military force in the Far East have been substantially reduced. Nowadays even the most ardent critics of Russia’s foreign policy evade to assert the existence of “the Russian threat” in the region. So the discussion on the nature, directions and validity of the very existence of the bilateral alliances between the U.S.A. and some NEA countries in their current form would be hard to avoid.

3. Receipt for Korea: Equidistance

Four major powers - Russia, China, the U.S.A. and Japan are, quite naturally, concerned about re-united Korea’s foreign policy and its future alliances. None of the “big four” would welcome an emergence of an unfriendly government in the united Korea. For Russia and China such an option is especially challenging one since both of them, unlike the U.S.A and Japan, have common land border with the peninsula.

That’s why neutralization of the re-unified Korea with international guarantees

from the U.S.A. China, Russia and Japan may be the most acceptable option to all those concerned and genially interested in an early and peaceful Korean settlement.

Formal guarantees of the unified Korea's neutral status should be given by the U.S.A., China, Russia, and Japan to each other as well as to Korea. Those obligations could be endorsed and reinforced by the UN Security Council, which can adopt a special resolution to that effect.

The U.S.A., China, Russia and Japan should also take mutual obligations to refrain from entering into any military alliance with the re-unified Korea and promise to each other and to the Koreans, of course, to never deploy their troops on the peninsula (except in cases of unanimous decisions by the UN Security Council adopted in accordance with the UN Charter).

In her turn, Korea after re-unification should declare itself a neutral state, take an obligation not to enter into military alliances with other countries (the existing bilateral treaties between China and North Korea, South Korea and the United States cease to have effect in due time), not to invite any foreign troops on her territory. The Korean troops can be sent overseas only as a peacekeeping or disaster-relieve force following the relevant decision by the UN Security Council. The participation of the re-united Korea in various non-military international and regional organizations (APEC, ASEM, ASEAN Regional Forum, etc.), multilateral and bilateral agreements on economic, trade and cultural cooperation are encouraged and supported.

North and South Korea should, finally, embark on a road of implementation of bilateral documents signed by them at various stages of inter-Korean relations to achieve unification through peaceful means. Gradual advancement down this way will create conditions conducive for substantial mutual reductions of armed forces and armaments along with simultaneous withdrawal of foreign troops from the peninsula. As a result, the DPRK will be able to release considerable funds for modernization of her economy and infrastructure, and the Republic of Korea will get additional money to assist the North to fulfill the task.

Critics may argue that the proposed approach supposedly would "infringe" on the sovereignty of the Korean people, or deprive somebody among the "big four"

of “free hands” in Korea. Such assertions are no more than a smokescreen for certain countries’ attempts to realize one’s own selfish egoistic interest, implement scenarios which have nothing to do neither with the true interests of the Korean nation, nor the interests of lasting peace and equal security for all countries in the region where because of history and geography the interests the most powerful nations of the modern world are happened to be so tightly intertwined.

The above-presented scheme to achieve the Korean settlement look too idealistic and premature one, and therefore – it is a task to be tackled with in a more distant future. Alas, the situation with the Six-Party talks and the state of inter-Korean relations once again suggest that absence of a clear and coherent final goal, common for the “Big Four” vision of a unified Korea’s place within any future security architecture in Northeast Asia is the very key, fundamental issue, without addressing which we will now and then stumble at each step into smaller questions and we will not know how to resolve them.

Emergence of neutral unified Korea as a result of joint efforts of the U.S.A., China, Russia, Japan and the Koreans themselves would signify the real end of the “Cold war” in Northeast Asia. Such Korea can serve as a cornerstone for a sustainable peace mechanism in Northeast Asia. Any future security architecture in the region should be fair, or, in other words, to provide the region’s countries with such external conditions that are most conducive to their common security and socio-economic development. It also should ensure finding and implementing mutually acceptable compromises, and not to become a tool of imposing the interests of one or other group of countries onto other participants of such an organization. Russia stands for establishing the very such mechanism.

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