The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Why Trump's North Korea Rhetoric Irks Russia (Op-ed)

Russia's softer approach to North Korea is all about interests, not old allegiances

By Maxim Trudolyubov

August 14, 2017

Carlos Barria / Reuters

As North Korea's nuclear weapons program advances, U.S. foreign policy seems to have split into two dramatically different paths.

While U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson went to Asia to put together a diplomatic campaign to contain North Korea, U.S. President Donald Trump erupted with threats to unleash "fire and fury" on it.

The White House's fiery rhetoric and bellicose posturing is contradicting diplomatic efforts

to get the reclusive state to the negotiating table.

"We do not seek a regime change, we do not seek the collapse of the regime, we do not seek an accelerated reunification of the peninsula," Tillerson pointed out two weeks ago, carefully paving the way for his Asia trip.

But Tillerson's meetings with his Chinese, Russian, and European counterparts on the sidelines of the ASEAN forum in Manila are now last week's news.

A politician beset by an investigation into his electoral campaign and desperate to reconnect with his base through harsh rhetoric, Trump's sudden outburst has led the United States and North Korea into trading threats of preemptive strikes.

The Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) and the southern Republic of Korea were created at the end of WWII when Soviet troops occupied the north and U.S. troops the south of the peninsula.

A secretive totalitarian principality gradually took shape in the north that based its political system on a quasi-religion of self-sufficiency, the Juche. The DPRK, which will turn 70 years old next year, is on its way to becoming the longest-held revolutionary autocracy.

The Kims know the business of regime survival. In fact, the leaders of North Korea are arguably world champions in this inhumane dark art.

Being publicly threatened by the U.S. is their bread and butter. This is why both Russia and China, who share the border with North Korea, have always been very careful in using public threats when dealing with the Pyongyang regime.

Related article: The Real Story of North Korean Labor Camps in Russia (Op-ed)

Russia or China's softer approach toward North Korea is not about any sympathies that may exist between the former allies. It is about interests.

North Korea is a problem for everyone, but it represents a different problem for each major player.

“While North Korea’s intercontinental nuclear capability is a game-changer for the Americans, it isn’t for the Chinese, who have already been living with North Korean nuclear weapons,” Jennifer Lind, associate professor of government at Dartmouth College, wrote in a recent opinion piece.

A collapse of the North Korean regime would spell chaos on China’s and Russia’s borders. Weapons of mass destruction could fall into the hands of rogue actors. Civil war could break out, precipitating a refugee crisis pale in comparison to the Syrian tragedy.

According to a simulation created by Jennifer Lind and Bruce Bennett at the Harvard Kennedy School’s Belfer Center, a post-collapse North Korea would require hundreds of thousands of troops to patrol borders, run humanitarian relief operations and missions to find “loose nukes.”

Hovering over the Korean Peninsula is the prospect, however distant, of a reunification and Russia cannot help but look at North Korea as a crude analog of a divided Germany.

Russia, which agreed to the German reunification and then saw the Western institutions expand to Russia’s western door, would be loathed to see anything even remotely similar happening at its eastern door.

Related article: Why North Korea Can Unite Russia and Japan (Op-ed)

“Both China and Russia would be apprehensive about a crisis that results in a reunification that would equal a geopolitical gain for the U.S. in the region at their expense,” Michael Kofman, a Global Fellow at the Wilson Center, said in a written comment for this piece.

“Russia and China have rather different relationships with DPRK, but in three areas they have shared concerns which can lead to policy alignment,” Kofman says.

“Both countries dislike the deployment of U.S. missile defense (THAAD) to South Korea; both are worried about the refugee crisis that would result from North Korea’s collapse or implosion, and both are concerned that unification on the peninsula would result in America’s ally Seoul absorbing North Korea.”

North Korea’s possible ICBM capability creates a sense of urgency for the White House, whose occupants include a lot of foreign policy novices.

People who are new to the North Korean phenomenon could be excused for being scared. China or Russia—which is partly responsible for the North’s very existence—see nothing new in the North Korea story.

They do not like what they see, but they know how to live with it. What they like even less is an American politician trying to solve his domestic problems by fuelling a foreign-policy conflict, just as Vladimir Putin did more than once.

Maxim Trudolyubov is a senior fellow with the Kennan Institute. This article was originally published by the Kennan Institute.

The views and opinions expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.