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Bad Cop, Mediator or Spoiler: Russia's Role on the Korean Peninsula

Moscow will not be written off by Washington and its allies when it comes to relations with North Korea.

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Yuri Smityuk / TASS

The summit between Russian President Vladimir Putin and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un in the Russian city of Vladivostok brings Moscow back into the diplomatic game focused on the Korean Peninsula. This symbolic breakthrough aside, however, Russia doesn't have a very strong hand among all the global and regional powers involved in the crisis resolution.

The tools Russia has at its disposal are too limited to have an impact on the calculations and behavior of North Korea or the U.S. As asymmetry in the Sino-Russian entente gradually grows in China's favor, Moscow is increasingly receptive to Beijing's agenda and prepared to play bad cop in an unofficial division of labor on the Korean Peninsula.

Russia could, however, be an indispensable partner in a broader conversation on security mechanisms in Northeast Asia, including offensive missiles and missile defense systems. The current lack of this broader conversation makes a solution to the North Korean nuclear issue less likely, if not impossible.

Kremlin Red Lines

Russia doesn't play a decisive role in the situation on the Korean Peninsula, but its behavior does affect general developments in the region. For a long time, Moscow tried to be an independent player on the peninsula, using its limited resources skillfully.

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Russia's historical connections with North Korea, its ties to the country's senior officials, and — most importantly — its status as a permanent member of the UN Security Council allowed it to play its own game. The stakes in that game are fairly high for the Kremlin, which has its own outlook on the situation on the peninsula, as well as clear red lines.

The stated goal of Russian policy and diplomatic efforts on the Korean Peninsula is denuclearization. Indeed, Moscow included the denuclearization of the peninsula in the latest version of its Foreign Policy Concept: a key strategic document outlining the Kremlin's approach to foreign policy and international issues, signed by Putin on November 30, 2016.

"Russia has always championed a non-nuclear status for the Korean Peninsula and will support its denuclearization in every possible way, believing that this objective can be attained through the Six-Party Talks," paragraph 89 of the document states. Moscow has signed off on all the UN Security Council resolutions on this issue, and repeats this goal in the statements of all senior officials, including Putin himself. Decision-makers in Russia, however, do not consider this official goal to be realistic.

Moscow believes that nuclear weapons are the last thing Pyongyang will give up, since they are the only guarantee of the Kim regime's survival. This view is deeply informed by the Kremlin's cynical zero-sum game worldview and its understanding of American foreign policy.

The Russian leadership is convinced that Washington is pursuing a strategy of color revolutions and economic pressure to depose regimes that it does not like. The North Korean regime, once labeled by President George W. Bush as part of the "Axis of Evil," falls into this category.

The Kremlin also firmly believes that the U.S. is pursuing regime change in Russia itself: these fears were born out of a series of color revolutions in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan, and later cemented by protests in Russia following the 2011 parliamentary elections, and Ukraine's Maidan revolution in 2014.

In Moscow's thinking, Kim Jong-un has learned from the fates of Iraq's Saddam Hussein and Libya's Muammar Gaddafi that for an authoritarian regime, the only safeguard against U.S. military intervention is the possession of nuclear weapons capable of hitting the American

mainland.

In that regard, the Kremlin views Kim as a rational actor who is guided by his own definition of his country's national interests and considerations of regime survival. Ultimately, although they never admit it in public, the Russians do not believe that the "complete, verifiable and irreversible denuclearization" of North Korea that U.S. President Donald Trump's administration is trying to accomplish is achievable.

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That does not mean that Russia is pleased about North Korea's nuclear status. Several years ago, Moscow was very worried about potential accidents, given the imperfections of North Korean nuclear and missile technologies.

A technical failure could result in a catastrophe in close proximity to the Russian border: the city and surrounding area of Vladivostok, home to almost one million people, are just 200 kilometers from North Korea. Those fears have, however, decreased significantly following successful nuclear tests in 2016-2017 that showed radical advances in North Korean technology.

Yet the Kremlin has other reasons to worry. First, Russia is fully aware of the consequences that the example set by North Korea could have for the global non-proliferation regime, which Moscow would like to keep intact. Second, the Kremlin is concerned about the risk of North Korean technology falling into the hands of non-state actors and terrorist groups.

Choked by sanctions, the theory goes, Pyongyang could be forced to earn hard currency by selling its technology on the black market, meaning it could ultimately end up in the wrong hands.

In addition, Moscow can't rule out the risk of a military conflict on the Korean Peninsula between North Korea on one side, and the U.S. and its allies on the other. Russia doesn't think that the North Korean nuclear program has offensive purposes, and is not invested in the theory that Kim Jong-un seeks the reunification of the Korean Peninsula by force.

However, as shown by the 2017 escalation of tension between North Korea and the U.S. following a series of missile and nuclear tests, a military conflict could erupt as a result of misunderstandings and miscommunication between Pyongyang and Washington.

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Finally, one of the major downsides for Russia of the North Korean nuclear program is that its advance, in Moscow's view, gives the U.S. a legitimate pretext to ramp up the American military presence on Russia's doorstep in Northeast Asia.

The Kremlin is not overly worried about conventional forces, but is very concerned about the deployment of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) missile defense system in South Korea, which was rolled out in the first half of 2017, and the installation of land-based Aegis ballistic missile defense systems in Japan. In Moscow's view, those systems are part of

an American strategy to create a global missile defense shield that may in the long run undermine the potency of the Russian strategic nuclear deterrent.

These concerns form a very clear set of red lines for Moscow when it comes to the North Korean nuclear issue. Russia will not recognize North Korea as a de facto or de jure nuclear state because of all the negative consequences that move could have for the global non-proliferation regime.

At the same time, Moscow will never agree to a set of sanctions that, according to Russian analysis, could lead to the collapse of the North Korean regime: the unpredictable security consequences of that scenario are simply too high for Russia to risk moving in that direction.

Second Fiddle to China

The Kremlin's red lines and overall analysis of the situation are very similar to those prevailing in Beijing, making Russia a natural partner for China on the Korean Peninsula. Neither Moscow nor Beijing will subscribe to any strategy proposed by the U.S. that is based on an unrealistic, in Russia's and China's view, assumption that Kim Jong-un might be forced to denuclearize. With no agreement on the endgame, it's hard to agree on the steps toward a solution that could satisfy all the parties involved.

Despite shared analysis and mistrust of the U.S., Russia and China have not always worked in tandem as closely as they do now. In the 1990s and 2000s, Moscow coordinated its activities on the Korean Peninsula with Beijing because both sides saw the situation in the region in the same light, and the Russian government considered many of the steps the U.S. took there to be counterproductive and provocative.

At the same time, the Kremlin maintained significant autonomy and shunned the leading role, believing that the North Korean question should be of far greater concern to China than Russia, and that Beijing had greater leverage. In addition, it was important for Moscow to demonstrate its independence from Beijing to the U.S. in order to induce the Americans to work directly with Russia.

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However, the rupture in U.S.-Russian relations following war in Ukraine has impacted on Moscow's actions in the region. Since that rupture in 2014, Moscow has been increasingly inclined to help Beijing, seeing fewer and fewer prospects for constructive cooperation with Washington on the Korean question.

This was especially noticeable during the 2017 escalation of the Korean crisis. Since the U.S. Congress adopted the Countering America's Adversaries through Sanctions Act against Russia in August 2017, the White House has had substantially less room for maneuvering in its relations with Moscow, a fact that Trump alluded to in his speech on the passing of the act.

Russia can't see many benefits now of being helpful to the U.S. in implementing its vision on the Korean question, especially given the substantive differences between the countries regarding possible solutions. The ongoing political crisis surrounding the Trump

administration following the release of Robert Mueller's report on alleged Russian interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election makes real cooperation between Russia and the U.S. even less likely.

Against this backdrop, Russia has a growing number of reasons to be helpful to China on the global stage. Even before the war in Ukraine broke out in 2014, China was already an important partner for Russia. But after the annexation of Crimea and the introduction of anti-Russian sanctions by many Western countries, good relations with Beijing became far more important to Moscow.

To weather the sanctions and its increased isolation, Russia needed a large external partner that could provide it with access to natural resource markets, replace lost loans and investments, and share critically important technologies.

The Chinese government was ready to take advantage of such an opportunity, and although not all of Russia's expectations have been met, many Russian companies have gained access to Chinese markets or funds since 2014.

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Large state-owned companies like Rosneft and Gazprom or private conglomerates owned by Putin's close associates have been especially successful in this respect. Symbiotic relations between China and Russia have intensified since 2014, but they are clearly asymmetric, since Moscow needs Beijing far more than Beijing needs Moscow. Nevertheless, the Chinese leadership takes pains to tactfully emphasize Moscow's equal status.

When it comes to North Korea, however, China really does require Russia's diplomatic assistance. Back in 2017, Trump made the Chinese position on North Korea an issue in U.S.-China trade relations, and the Chinese leadership decided not to enter into a direct confrontation with Washington over the matter.

The White House advocated for tougher sanctions against North Korea, which could have adversely impacted the ruling regime, whose collapse is clearly not in China's interests. Using Russia to help soften the blow against North Korea seemed like the best option for Beijing. In any case, Moscow had nothing to lose in terms of its relations with Washington, and U.S. frustration with the Russian position on North Korea wasn't going to significantly change the overall picture.

Russia also stood to benefit from going to bat for China, since it needed closer ties with Beijing amid stricter sanctions against Russia itself. In the end, Moscow was the driving force behind softening the UN Security Council resolutions against North Korea back in 2017. Given the current dynamics within the Russia-U.S.-China triangle, Moscow is expected to continue its increasingly active support of Beijing by playing second fiddle to China on North Korea.

Russia's Toolkit

Moscow's maneuvering in the UN Security Council in 2017, in which Russia played bad cop in

an agreed division of labor with China, demonstrates just one instrument from the Russian toolkit on the Korean Peninsula: diplomacy. As a permanent member of the Security Council, Russia is indispensable for any moves that the international community might want to make on the future of the Korean Peninsula.

Russia's veto power gives it a lot of leverage in closed-door negotiations on UN resolutions involving North Korea. It also gives weight to any diplomatic initiatives that come out of Moscow. This is why in 2017, Beijing and Moscow teamed up to set out a three-step peace plan for the Korean Peninsula known as Freeze for Freeze (Pyongyang would freeze its nuclear and missile tests in exchange for Washington and Seoul freezing some joint military exercises).

This plan hardly laid the foundations for talks between the U.S. and North Korea that resulted in summits in Singapore and Hanoi between Trump and Kim (they were far more the result of diplomacy by South Korean President Moon Jae-in), but that has not stopped Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov from claiming otherwise on numerous occasions.

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Moscow has a good network in Pyongyang, and talks to all of the other players on the Korean Peninsula that took part in the Six-Party Talks aimed at ending the North's nuclear program (China, Japan, North Korea, South Korea, and the U.S.).

Russia's problem, however, is that unlike China, it has very little economic leverage over North Korea. In 2017, Russia-North Korea trade turnover was $77.9 million (1.5 percent of North Korea's trade). In the wake of international sanctions, last year trade turnover fell to $34 million (1.2 percent of Pyongyang's trade). Even if the trade between the two countries that goes through China is taken into account, Moscow's importance as an economic partner for Pyongyang is still far less than that of Beijing.

Such a dramatic drop in trade can be explained by UN sanctions against North Korea, to which Russia appears to be adhering — most of the time. There is evidence that Russia has violated the sanctions and provided Pyongyang with a lifeline by using tankers to transfer fuel to North Korean vessels at sea, as reported by Reuters' Polina Nikolskaya in a series of investigative reports, but the volume of fuel smuggled cannot make a huge difference for North Korea.

The U.S. Treasury has been monitoring the situation closely, and has put many Russian entities and nationals allegedly involved in violating the sanctions on Specially Designated Nationals And Blocked Persons lists.

Another economic tool at Russia's disposal is the plan to implement a number of business projects in the region: the construction of a Russia–South Korea pipeline that would run through North Korea, a railway link between both Koreas with access to the Trans-Siberian railway, and a shared electricity supply system involving Russia and both Koreas. These projects would generate revenue for Russia's state-owned corporations and create an incentive for the North Korean regime to preserve stability on the peninsula.

All of these projects are, however, now on hold due to sanctions, and Russian Railways, which

is involved in the reconstruction of a rail link to the port of Rajin in North Korea, is the only Russian state-owned enterprise that appears keen to return to its project: the gas monopoly Gazprom and electricity producers have historically been far more cautious with respect to any projects involving North Korea.

Because of UN sanctions, in putting these projects on the table, Moscow finds itself in a Catch 22 situation: the sanctions need to be dropped for the projects to become more realistic and to offer North Korea an incentive to change its behavior, but because there is no immediate stimulus for Pyongyang to change course, UN sanctions could stay in place indefinitely, thereby killing Russia's hopes of implementing these trilateral projects.

Diplomatic Unity

Russia plays a very mixed role on the Korean Peninsula. It tries to be an honest mediator and bring the parties to the table, but can't be efficient because it doesn't have leverage over North Korea. Another important reason is that its relationship with the U.S. is severely damaged, even though North Korea is one of the few topics that Moscow and Washington still try to discuss at a working level, and where the dialogue is constructive amid the overall increasingly toxic picture of U.S.-Russia relations.

Washington believes that Moscow acts as a spoiler, because its position in the UN Security Council upsets U.S. plans to use maximum pressure to nudge Pyongyang to a dialogue on American terms. In reality, the Kremlin's actions stem from its vision of Russia's national interest with regard to the Korean Peninsula.

Russia is also playing a good cop, bad cop routine with China, which reflects both the concomitance of Moscow and Beijing's visions on the North Korean nuclear issue, as well as growing asymmetry in the Sino-Russian entente that increasingly favors China.

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Despite Russia's limited toolkit, growing alignment with China, and its broken relationship with the U.S., Moscow will not be written off by Washington and its allies when it comes to the diplomatic process on North Korea.

First and foremost, if any solution is to be achieved and blessed by the UN Security Council, the international community will need Russia's support, and so the diplomatic framework will have to accommodate the Kremlin's interests.

Even more important is the evolving strategic context, which makes the North Korean crisis so dangerous, and Russia's role more important. Northeast Asia is on the frontline of the renewed competition between the great powers. As tensions between the U.S. and China grow and become protracted, it's essential to international peace for agreements to be reached on future guardrails to stop competition between centers of power from leading to growing risks of military confrontation.

With the collapse of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, the potential for an intermediate-range missiles arms race between China and Russia on one side and the U.S. and

its allies on the other has dramatically increased. A negotiated diplomatic framework that would limit an arms race in this part of the world is impossible without engaging Moscow.

Although the short to medium-term result of these efforts might not be the "complete, verifiable and irreversible dismantlement" of North Korea's nuclear program that the U.S. is trying to achieve, putting a cap on deploying offensive and defensive missile systems while freezing advances in its nuclear program might be no less important, given the changing global security environment.

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