

Russia's "Return" to Asia: How Should South Korea Respond?

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On August 24 2011, Russian President Dmitri Medvedev and North Korean leader Kim Jong-il held a joint summit in Eastern Siberia, the first such meeting between the two countries since 2002. After the summit, many speculated upon the impact this meeting would have upon the current stalemate on the Korean Peninsula over North Korea's nuclear program. Although some experts viewed Kim Jong-il's visit to Russia as merely a form of begging bowl diplomacy, such analysis underestimates recent efforts by Russia to engage Northeast Asia. Moreover, the strategic significance of the summit is reflected in the agreement reached between the two leaders which would imply that the summit could be a watershed moment in bringing about new dynamics on the Korean Peninsula and among neighboring countries. Particularly, the proposed Trans-Korea Gas Pipeline Project would have a strong impact on the political geography of Northeast Asia.

In November 2011, South Korea and Russia held their own summit in St Petersburg where the Trans-Korea Gas Pipeline project was reconfirmed. Moscow even expressed its willingness to build the pipeline, passing through North Korea, at its own expense. Such a very active participation from Russia though could provoke certain competition with China in the region.

The future course of this project is expected to be decided during the negotiation process between Russia's Gazprom and South Korea's KOGAS. Yet in South Korea, domestically, this issue of building a gas pipeline

could be controversial in many ways. There are concerns regarding security matters related to North Korea as well as a lack of trust in Russia. At the same time, the responses from the United States and China must be taken into account. As 2012 is the year of leadership change for many countries in the region, it is also possible that the project will become unnecessarily politicized and eventually jeopardized. Therefore, South Korea should carefully prepare an action plan for realizing this project in order to take advantage of this opportunity amid changing dynamics in the region.

In recent years there has been much talk of the United States "returning" to Asia, but Russia is also making its own return. This gas pipeline project shows how Russia intends to use its vast energy resources to facilitate its ambition to play a new role in Northeast Asia. This Issue Briefing addresses the impact of Russia's reengagement and how South Korea should respond by considering both the positive and negative effects.

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The Russia-North Korea Summit and Bilateral Relations

To understand the significance of the agreement drafted at the Russia-North Korea summit, it is necessary to understand the background of how the summit came about.

First, the Russia-North Korea summit can be interpreted as a sign that Russia has begun to consolidate its position in Asia and strengthen its influence over the region. One aim of this is to solidify its identity as a “Euro-Pacific State.” Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia has had only a limited role in the region due to various internal and external factors, such as its weakened economy, misdirected foreign policies, lost channels of influence toward Asia, the North Korean nuclear problem, and diplomatic tension between the North and the United States, as well as its opportunistic behaviors in Northeast Asia. Furthermore, from Moscow’s perspective Washington’s policy has been to prevent Russia from reconsolidating its strategic influence in Asia. Recently though, Russia has made efforts to increase its influence over issues related to the Korean Peninsula even at its own expense, backed by its resurgent power from energy resources. Russia’s recent effort to revitalize various agendas for cooperation with North Korea is a good example of it becoming involved on the Korean Peninsula. Russia provided fifty-thousand tons of food aid to North Korea for flood relief and is now considering sending the equivalent amount again. Through these efforts, Russia is trying to elevate its relationship with North Korea to a strategic cooperative partnership. Moscow clearly recognizes that the Korean Peninsula has been at the core of Northeast Asian politics. Furthermore, it still remembers its past diplomatic failure when Russia was left out from the Four-Party Talks to deal with the first North Korean nuclear crisis in 1994. The Kremlin now strives to reinvigorate the Russia-North Korea relationship and enhance bilateral strategic cooperation which has not been the same since the collapse of the Soviet Union.

In this context, it is important to take note that Russia has revived the North Korea-Russia Intergovernmental Committee for Cooperation in Trade, Economy, Science and Technology and has also restarted discussions to seek a resolution to the debt problem which has been the biggest barrier to furthering bilateral economic cooperation. These actions are reminiscent of Russia-North Korea relations in 2006-2007 when Russia carried out efforts to resolve the tensions surrounding the Banco Delta Asia issue. During that time, Russia sought to maximize its economic interests by promoting the Trans-Korea Railway Project and energy cooperation on the Korean Peninsula. In the end, this kind of opportunistic approach by Russia yielded no benefits as the Six-Party Talks eventually broke down. The reactivation of the North Korea-Russia Intergovernmental Committee for Cooperation which had been halted since 2007 is important, particularly during this current period of high tension on the Korean Peninsula. This move also indicates that Russia is now willing to pay the price for becoming involved. In fact, North Korea’s debt to Russia which is approximately ten billion dollars is not really a huge burden for Russia. Resolving the debt issue though indicates a strategic decision on the part of Russia since full-scale economic cooperation between the two countries can only happen after the debt problem is solved. The Kremlin’s willingness to resolve this outstanding issue implies that it is willing to rebuild its strategic cooperative relationship with North Korea. The recent bilateral summit signals that a major step has been taken toward this goal.

Russia’s new approach also suits the needs of North Korea’s leaders as they seek to adjust its current over-dependency on China. Since the inauguration of the Lee Myung-bak government in 2008, North Korea has experienced a decrease in its foreign currency earnings, which it had enjoyed with the Mt. Geumgang tourism project and Kaesong Industrial Complex. At the same time, Pyongyang has negative relations with the United States due to the ongoing nuclear issue and



faces further difficulties with heightened tensions on the Korean Peninsula following the sinking of the *Cheonan* and the shelling of Yeonpyeong Island. In this situation, North Korea had to rely more on China for both economic and security support. As the North Korean regime has proclaimed that it will achieve a "Strong and Prosperous Nation" by 2012, it will have to draw back from its excessive reliance on China in order to revive its self-reliance ideology of *Juche*. By using the concept of "balance of dependence," a number of North Korea experts believe that the recent efforts to build a close relationship between Russia and North Korea reflect Pyongyang's efforts to rebalance its ties with Beijing.

Alongside this, North Korea also expects to procure a stable source of energy and electricity by improving its relations with Russia. According to the itinerary of Kim Jong-il's visit to Russia, he visited the Bureya hydroelectric power station and the junction point of East Siberia-Pacific Ocean oil pipeline (ESPO) at Skovorodino. On his way back to Pyongyang via northeastern China, he stopped by the Daqing oilfield which is at the intersection of Chinese and Russian pipelines. While this shows the desperate need of Kim Jong-il to solve North Korea's chronic energy shortages, compared with his visits to China, this trip to Russia is indicative of something different. During his visits to China, Kim Jong-il only visited symbolic places which he used to propagate North Korea's future intention to carry out economic reform and opening. However, the places that Kim Jong-il visited during his visit to Russia would imply that he is more interested in the pragmatic help he can get from Russia.

Russian President Dmitry Medvedev's remarks on the result of the summit and the related media reports indicate that there is a convergence of Russian and North Korean interests. After the summit, the Kremlin sought to emphasize to the world that the meeting was not about strengthening its relationship with North Korea. Rather, Russia wanted to underscore Kim Jong-il's agreement on its plan to funnel Russian natural gas

to South Korea via North Korea. It also announced an agreement to launch a trilateral special committee on gas pipeline construction. What then are the reasons for Russia's active pursuit of a Trans-Korea Gas Pipeline Project?

It can be simply interpreted that Russia needs to develop a new market for natural gas exports as it is well known that natural gas sales are critical for its economy. Yet Moscow is facing challenges as the demand for its natural gas has decreased due to China's focus on importing natural gas from Central Asia through connecting new pipeline from the region and U.S. interest in developing its domestic sources of shale gas. Therefore, Russia is now shifting its focus to Japan and Korea as potential new customers.

However, such economic interests cannot be the only motivation for Russia's eagerness on the Trans-Korea Gas Pipeline Project. Energy resources are a strategic commodity, therefore energy diplomacy should be understood as a strategic calculation that not only considers economic factors but also foreign affairs and national security. Russia's status as a major gas exporter to Europe means it has a significant leverage over Europe. The Russian pipelines that spread all over Europe are the core channels for Russia to impose pressure on European countries. The massive investment by Moscow in the construction of energy supply pipelines to Asia over the last few years can also be understood in the same context. The construction of the ESPO pipeline and the launch of the Eastern Gas Program will be the crucial steps toward expanding Russia's influence over Asian countries. There are many ways in which Russia is extending its major energy pipelines. For instance, it has extended the ESPO pipeline from Skovorodino toward Daqing and it is now used to supply Russian petroleum to China. This extension drew much attention from the world as it seemed to indicate that these two major countries had finally formed an energy alliance.

Now Russia is attempting to strengthen its influence over the two Koreas by connecting its gas pipe-



lines to the Korean Peninsula. If Russia succeeds in creating a powerful channel of influence through these pipelines then we could expect Moscow to play a more active role as a mediator in resolving tensions on the Korean Peninsula as well consolidating its status in the region. This would make the Trans-Korea Gas Pipeline Project a worthy investment for Russia.

The other interest for Russia with the Trans-Korea Gas Pipeline Project will be to set the groundwork for future projects in Asia, such as an electric power grid connection and railway line extensions. Ultimately these projects will enhance Russia's network with Asian countries. Furthermore, promoting these projects will help Russia to secure human and material resources which are crucial for developing the local provinces of the Russia Far East and Siberia regions. On October 13, 2010, Russia held a special ceremony to celebrate the completion of the repair work to the railway line connecting Khasan in the Russia Far East to North Korea's northeastern port city Rajin, a project that was done solely at Russia's own expense. If the Russia-North Korea railway line is connected to South Korea in the future, it is estimated that two hundred thousand railway containers could be transported through this route every year. Subsequently, it will help facilitate the integration of the Russian Far East and Siberia with the vibrant economies of Northeast Asia. Domestically, this would help Russia resolve the chronic uneven regional development. In terms of Moscow's foreign policy goals, it would consolidate its identity as a "Euro-Pacific State" and help establish its place as a global power again.

Reviving strategic cooperation with Russia is also beneficial for North Korea as well. During the buildup to the 2011 summit, North Korea sounded out the possibility of military cooperation with Russia by requesting for arms such as new fighter jets. Moscow though was obviously uncomfortable with such a request, since providing strategic arms to North Korea might stir up an arms race among neighboring countries and destabilize the strategic balance in Northeast

Asia. Nevertheless, it seems like there was some discussion on bilateral military cooperation when Kim Jong-il visited. At the summit, Russia announced that the two countries will hold joint military exercises at some point in the future. This military cooperation between the two countries will, above all, help to relieve North Korea's sense of insecurity. From the North Korean leadership's perspective, this will help to shape desirable conditions for balanced diplomacy between China and Russia. Presumably, Russia is also keeping an eye on China in responding to North Korea's requests for enhanced security cooperation. Recently, China has leased the port of Rajin which is close to the Russian border and Chinese warships have already paid a number of visits to the port.

The Russia-North Korea summit, therefore, was the junction where the interests of the two countries met. North Korea needs Russia to diffuse its excessive reliance on China and to secure economic support. Russia wants to revitalize its relationship with North Korea to restore its channel of influence on the Korean Peninsula and more broadly Asia.

Russia's Expanding Role and Issues on the Korean Peninsula

If strategic cooperation between Russia and North Korea has now been restored, how will this affect the situation on the Korean Peninsula and in Northeast Asia more broadly? There are some conflicting perspectives on this issue.

Firstly, some experts believe that the restoration of ties between Russia and North Korea will exacerbate tensions on the Korean Peninsula. This view assumes that North Korea would use its consolidated relationship with Russia and China as leverage to check the United States, Japan, and South Korea's coordinated efforts to pressure North Korea to take specific steps to denuclearization before the resumption of the Six-Party Talks. In this regard, Russia's support for North



Korea in order to develop its Far East region and expand its influence in Northeast Asia would contribute a negative influence toward the resumption of the Six-Party Talks.

It can also be argued though that North Korea could take advantage of its enhanced relationship with Russia to help it resume the Six-Party Talks. This is especially true when the results of the Russia-North Korea summit are carefully examined. Russia would not forgo its role as a middleman that it has maintained within the confrontational structure between the United States, Japan, and South Korea on one side and China and North Korea on the other. As a middleman, Moscow has straddled an even line between supporting China and North Korea's position for early resumption of Six-Party Talks without preconditions while at the same time pushing North Korea to take concrete steps toward denuclearization. The Russia-North Korea summit showed this very effort of Moscow seeking a compromise between the two sides. After the summit, a Kremlin spokesperson mentioned that "Kim Jong Il has expressed his readiness to resume the six-party (nuclear) talks without preconditions" and then said "during those talks (the North Koreans) will be ready to impose a ban on the production of nuclear materials and their testing"¹ On the surface, it would appear that Russia supports the position of North Korea along with China that the Six-Party Talks should be resumed without any preconditions. However, Russia's announcement that North Korea will be ready to call a moratorium on the production of nuclear materials and nuclear testing, even if it comes "after the resumption of the talks," indicates Russia's efforts to bring out North Korea's willingness to commit to denuclearization. In other words, Russia continues to maintain its mediating position by supporting the early resumption of the Six-Party Talks and the principle of problem solving through dialogue without giving up its overall goal of denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. Thus, the view that stronger strategic cooperation between Russia and North Korea

would impact negatively upon the current situation on the Korea Peninsula does not hold up.

Secondly, similar to the first but a different perspective in terms of its emphasis is that a "northern triangle"—China, Russia, and North Korea—has now been established as Russia has abandoned its strategic ambiguity or opportunistic diplomacy and supports North Korea. This perspective argues that this "northern triangle" will stand up together against the "southern triangle"—the United States, Japan and South Korea.

This view foresees confrontation between these two "triangles," however, it is less convincing than the first view mentioned before as it does not consider the uneasiness felt by Russia when China acquired a ten-year lease for Rajin port located in North Korea in 2010. The seaway between the East Sea and the Sea of Okhotsk is mainly used by North Korean, Russian, and Japanese vessels. It would then be interpreted as a sign of expansion for Chinese vessels to utilize this seaway. China, however, leased Rajin to act as a rear port for its mainly landlocked northeastern provinces. Still, the port could also be utilized as a base for China to contain Russia's maneuvers toward the south in case of a contingency on the Korean Peninsula. In spring 2011, warships of the People's Liberation Army Navy entered Rajin port revealing that China has the capability to dispatch its naval ships all the way round to the Russian-North Korean border via South Korea's coastal waters and the East Sea. In the future it could be conceivable that China, under the pretext of protecting its vessels and its properties in the port, could dispatch its naval ships to prevent Russian military involvement on the Korean Peninsula. Given this context, it is possible to understand Russia's intentions with the Trans-Korea Gas Pipeline Project in seeking enhanced influence on the land to balance China's geopolitical superiority at sea.

The third perspective believes that Russia and North Korea's economic cooperation would have a positive effect on the Korean Peninsula. According to this perspective, the Russia-North Korea summit could



add momentum to trilateral cooperation between Russia and the two Koreas since the Trans-Korea Gas Pipeline Project is beneficial to all three countries. Furthermore, such a view holds that the development of this trilateral cooperation could stabilize the situation on the Korean Peninsula by transforming the current conflicting diplomatic structure in the region.

The key element of this perspective is transformation of the regional strategic structure in a positive way through Russia's reemergence in the region. Going by this perspective, it can be expected that North Korea would be able to decrease its dependence on China and revive the diplomatic balance between Russia and China that it once had with the Sino-Soviet Split during the Cold War. Depending on the outcome of the strategic cooperation between Russia and North Korea, China's ambition to strengthen its regional leadership by taking advantage of changes that occur over the Korean Peninsula might be impeded. Moreover, this perspective believes that there is a strong possibility that Russia will become another major player in the Six-Party Talks and will be involved in the security framework of Northeast Asia which the United States and China have long dominated.

Such changes in Northeast Asia brought on by Russia having an enhanced role can only be realized when two preconditions are met: reestablishing Russia's strategic relations with North Korea and rebuilding ties with the United States. In this respect, the concept of a "structural hole," which describes North Korea as a disconnected actor in the network of Northeast Asia, is important toward understanding these preconditions. The relations between the U.S.-North Korea, Japan-North Korea, and North-South Korea are the most distinctive "structural holes" in the region. Nevertheless, the relations between Russia and North Korea as well as between Russia and the United States are both important "structural holes" that have received little attention. In order to deal with the problem of North Korea, these two previously overlooked "structural holes" that the current structure of the Six-

Party Talks fails to embrace should be considered.

The first precondition is that Russia and North Korea should fully restore strategic cooperation. After Russia had severed its strategic cooperation with North Korea in the early 1990s, it lost its influence not only on the North but also on the rest of Northeast Asia as well. Beginning with the recent summit, Russia should firmly revive its strategic cooperation with North Korea by resolving the debt problem and initiating strategic projects such as the construction of gas pipeline, railway lines, and electrical grid connections.

In this sense, the Trans-Korea Gas Pipeline Project suggests an interesting prospect from the viewpoint of social network theory. Previous studies on security and alliances emphasize that the connection of energy or transportation links can be a critical condition for bilateral strategic cooperation. This would imply that the gas pipeline project will enable Russia to secure a channel of influence toward North Korea and therefore strategic cooperation between the two countries can be reestablished. Such a new link would fill the "structural hole" in the Northeast Asian network of geopolitical powers and influence its cooperative and competitive structure.

For South Korea, it is crucial to know whether this new strategic link between Russia and North Korea will be different from the current strategic links between China and North Korea. If it follows a similar pattern, then this strategic cooperation will not bring about any substantial change in the existing geopolitical structure of the region. The only impact would be changes in relative gains and losses for Russia and China. However, if this Russia-North Korea strategic link seeks cooperation with the United States and South Korea, then it would certainly fill the "structural hole" that exists in the region and provide an important opportunity for shaping a whole new level of regional cooperation.

A positive sign for South Korea in this respect is that Russia is willing to have the South participate in the gas pipeline project as a major partner. According-



ly, Seoul needs to consider the Russia-North Korea-South Korea energy transportation network construction project from a broader view. This means going beyond energy security and looking at the readjustment of South Korea's policy toward Russia. Presumably, Moscow will also be carefully examining which direction it should take in its relationship with North Korea in order to meet its long-term strategic interests in Northeast Asia. In such a situation, both Seoul and Moscow have the opportunity to approach this project as an area for strategic cooperation and therefore should try to enhance transparency when communicating with each other.

The second precondition for enhancing Russia's role in the region is to establish strategic cooperation in Northeast Asia between the United States and Russia. Despite Russia's resurgence as a major global power since the emergence of Putin, it is curious that it still has not recovered its political influence in Northeast Asia. While much of the loss of influence came from Russia breaking off contacts with North Korea, the policy of the United States toward Russia should also be considered as an important factor. Since the end of the Cold War, Moscow has viewed Washington's policies as seeking to check Russia so that it would not regain its status as a key strategic actor in Northeast Asia. Even though the United States tried to cooperate with Russia on global issues, it never really devised a strategy to engage Russia in the Northeast Asia region and left its interests unattended for over 20 years. During that time, Washington has experienced bitter failures in trying to resolve the North Korean nuclear problem. When the first North Korean nuclear crisis occurred, the United States attempted to solve the issue bilaterally with North Korea which brought about little results. Since the outbreak of the second nuclear crisis in 2002, Washington has tried to engage China to help resolve the issue but this effort too has reached a deadlock. It is time for the United States to consider building a cooperative relationship with Russia in Northeast Asia in order to try a more comprehensive

and network-minded approach toward resolving the nuclear crisis.

The "structural holes" caused by the delinking process between Russia-North Korea and Russia-U.S. relations continue to serve as the main obstacle toward the emergence of a cooperative order in Northeast Asia. To overcome this, the United States should support cooperative projects among Russia, North Korea, and South Korea such as the Trans-Korea Gas Pipeline Project as well as pursue efforts to construct strategic links with Russia. In this regard, the South Korean government should consider a United States-Russia-South Korea trilateral dialogue and propose this format to both Moscow and Washington.

The Future Tasks for South Korea

How should South Korea address these possible changes related to the Korean Peninsula? Which direction must Seoul take when carrying out trilateral cooperative projects such as the Trans-Korea Gas Pipeline Project or developing a strategic partnership with Russia as manifested in the South Korea-Russia summit in 2008? The South Korean government should consider every possible option in terms of the following three strategic directions.

The first is limited engagement. This indicates that Seoul should not over interpret the implications of the gas pipeline project and should only pursue limited goals such as encouraging the reform and opening of North Korea's economy in order to promote its soft landing policies. The second is comprehensive engagement. This direction believes that South Korea should align with Moscow's efforts to incorporate the Russian Far East to Northeast Asia and subsequently induce North Korea's participation toward this goal. For this, it will be crucial to come up with a blueprint for sub-regional cooperation that encompasses the Russian Far East and the North Korean border area. Furthermore, the focus of this effort should not be



only about inducing North Korea but also helping Russia to become an “Asian state.” Naturally it is important to make sure that the project should have enough momentum to attract North Korea in the long run. The third is region formation policy which seeks structural transformation in Northeast Asia. South Korea as a middle power should form a “semi-balancing alliance” through strategic cooperation with Russia and find a mechanism to alleviate possible tension between the United States and China. This approach will possibly help to stabilize the dynamics of Northeast Asian politics that have been mainly affected by the bilateral relationship between the United States and China. In the end, Seoul should consider all three strategic directions and pursue a complex strategy.

It is equally important that this strategy related to regional politics should be a nonpartisan approach that has a broad national consensus. In this context, an action plan should be set out that could be sustained even with a change of government and needs to be prepared based on a thorough understanding of this policy’s context and desirable mechanism that makes this policy work. Still, before hastily pursuing trilateral cooperation, it is important that South Korea enhances its strategic communication and understanding with Russia first. Along with this effort, Seoul must also closely collaborate with other Northeast Asian countries and discuss what kind of impact that various types of trilateral dialogue, such as South Korea-United States-Russia, South Korea-Russia-China, South Korea-Japan-Russia, would bring to the region. Based on this collaboration, it is important to set multilayered goals and come up with possible ways for medium to long-term cooperation. This regional consultation should come first, and then, as mentioned earlier, South Korea should make efforts to reach an agreement with Russia on clearer goals and action plans for strategic cooperation, which finally will be followed by a trilateral cooperative system in the region. The 2012 Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum which will be held in Vladivostok would be a

good opportunity to begin work on this three step process.

Since the end of the Cold War, Russia has taken an opportunistic approach to Northeast Asian issues, such as the North Korean nuclear crisis and establishing a peace-security system in the region. Only after the most difficult and complicated issues were solved through the efforts of the United States and China, did Russia engage this region in order to secure its economic interests. However, Moscow now shows a strong will to assume a more active role in the region even to the extent of paying its own costs. Now is the time for Northeast Asian countries to position Russia as a strategic actor which holds a stake in the region. Furthermore, it is time to think outside the narrow dichotomy of U.S.-China relations by considering the enhanced role of Russia in Northeast Asia and how to induce North Korea in this structural change in the region. In this context, the Trans-Korea Gas Pipeline Project should not be considered merely as an energy-related project but as a project which requires addressing the more comprehensive problem of regional politics.

With the death of Kim Jong-il in December 2011, regional politics is in flux again. China’s approach toward North Korea is expected to become more active as it is worried about the regime’s stability. However, it could be seen as Beijing’s response to Pyongyang’s recent efforts to reach out toward Moscow. There are various predictions on the future direction of the Kim Jong-eun regime and among them is the prospect that pro-China forces will become stronger in North Korea. Considering this, it may be a concern that China’s influence over North Korea will grow to excess. To cope with this, it is critical that the South Korean government design a comprehensive approach toward North Korea that could help them to continue their efforts to achieve a balance in their foreign relations. In this process, Seoul’s diplomacy, with cooperation from the neighboring countries in Northeast Asia, should lead Pyongyang on a path toward reform and opening in the long term. South Korea should moti-



vate and utilize Russia's role in building a network in the region and think about the strategic function of trilateral cooperation among Moscow, Pyongyang, and Seoul. In the end, the Trans-Korea Gas Pipeline Project could become the trigger for new changes in the regional politics of Northeast Asia. ■

Notes

¹ http://articles.cnn.com/2011-08-24/world/russia.north.korea.talks_1_nuclear-talks-round-of-six-party-talks-north-korea?_s=PM:WORLD

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