



## Journal Issue

# Russia's Political Role in East Asia

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## RUSSIA'S POLITICAL ROLE IN EAST ASIA

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## The North Korea Nuclear Problem and the US–China–Russia Strategic Triangle

By Artyom Lukin (Far Eastern Federal University, Russia)

### Abstract

There are three main actors in the Korean nuclear crisis: Pyongyang, Washington and Beijing. However, Moscow may be seeking a more prominent role in the game. In pursuing its North Korea diplomacy, Russia has displayed increasingly close collaboration with China. Russian and Chinese aversion to Kim Jong Un and his nukes is eclipsed by their shared animosity to US hegemony. Ultimately, the North Korean nuclear menace is a symptom of the dysfunctional state of the current international order, in which its premier players are not capable of working together.

The ongoing drama around the Korean Peninsula has increasingly been compared to the Cuban missile crisis. Since 1962, the risk of a nuclear exchange and a large-scale conventional war between antagonistic powers has never seemed higher. There are three main actors in this game: Pyongyang, Washington and Beijing. Three other players—Seoul, Tokyo and Moscow—are now more or less marginal. However, Russia may be seeking a more prominent role in the North Korea crisis.

North Korea is driven by the basic instinct of survival in the face of the real or imagined threats presented by the United States (US) and South Korea. Pyongyang views nuclear weapons as the only way to reliably protect itself from external enemies and preserve its sovereignty. For its part, the US is determined to deny nuclear capability to a country that has, for almost seven decades, branded America as its archenemy. At the same time, the US pursues another, more profound, goal of sustaining its military-political primacy in East Asia and checking Beijing's strategic expansion. Finally, China does not wish to see war on its borders and thus is interested in keeping peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula. But, Beijing's greater desire is to drive the US out of East Asia, turning—or returning—the region into a Sino-centric sphere of influence.

### The United States

Upon taking office, the Trump administration declared that Obama's policy of "strategic patience" toward North Korea had utterly failed and that a new approach was needed. In contrast to the previous administration, who never treated Pyongyang as a top priority, Trump has, from the very beginning, identified the North Korean nuclear and missile program as the number one issue of his foreign policy agenda. The doctrine of "maximum pressure and engagement" was formulated, but it has not been qualitatively different from Obama's North Korea policy. The main emphasis has been on continuing the ratcheting up of sanctions, in conjunction with pressing

China to exert its presumed leverage over Pyongyang. The aim is to fully isolate the North Korean regime diplomatically and economically, forcing it to sue for negotiations at which the US would lay down the conditions. The only significant departure of Trump's policy from that of Obama's has been to raise the specter of a military option with belligerent rhetoric and demonstrations of force addressed to Kim Jong Un.

Trump's "maximum pressure" has, so far, proved no more effective than Obama's "strategic patience." The North continues its missile-testing spree and has conducted a powerful nuclear—possibly, even thermonuclear—explosion, the first on Trump's watch. Washington is still hopeful about China's assistance. Many in the US political establishment cling to the belief that all roads to Pyongyang lead through Beijing. This perspective is based on North Korea's economic dependence on China, which accounts for roughly 90% of the North's trade. In order to compel Beijing to take severe measures against its neighbor, the Americans are threatening so-called secondary sanctions, that is, the blacklisting of Chinese banks and other entities doing business with the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK). Considering China's high level of integration with the dollar-dominated global economy, Washington's use of extensive secondary sanctions could seriously damage the People's Republic of China (PRC). Furthermore, the US keeps emphasizing that in order to insure itself against the North Korean missile threat, it has to bolster its military assets in Northeast Asia, especially ballistic missile defense systems, such as the deployment of THAAD in South Korea. Washington knows full well that Beijing views the buildup of American missile systems close to its borders as a major affront and a threat to its national security.

### China

Partly due to the relentless American pressure, but also out of its own exasperation with Kim Jong Un—

who from the very beginning of his rule has displayed extreme defiance toward Beijing—, China has been tightening the screws on Pyongyang in recent months. In just over a month, from August 5 to September 11, Beijing supported two UN Security Council resolutions imposing severe sectoral restrictions on the DPRK. Considering that the PRC and DPRK are bound by the 1961 alliance treaty, it is unprecedented in modern international relations that a great power subjects its ally to harsh sanctions.

That said, it is unlikely that Beijing will apply crippling sanctions, verging on a total blockade of North Korea, as Washington demands. For all its disgust at the recalcitrant Kim Jong Un, the Chinese leadership does not wish to push the DPRK into a desperate situation that could trigger a state breakdown. Beijing remains interested in the DPRK's continued existence, with or without the Kim dynasty, even if this has to be as a *de facto* nuclear-armed state. China is concerned about the prospect of millions of refugees streaming from a collapsing North Korea across its borders or WMD assets falling into the wrong hands. But, first and foremost, Beijing cannot accept the possibility that the DPRK's unraveling would lead to the annexation of the North by the South and the creation of a unified Korean state, with Seoul as its capital. A single Korean state will likely be pro-American, with the implication that not only southern Korea, but the entire Peninsula will fall under the military-political control of China's main rival, the US. One should keep in mind that on at least three occasions in the last few centuries, China went to war to prevent foreign domination of Korea: in the late 16<sup>th</sup> century against the Japanese; in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century also against Japan; and in 1950 against the Americans.

Beijing suspects—and with good reason—that the US military presence in Korea is meant not only to protect the South from a hypothetical invasion by the North, but also to contain China in Asia. Leading US strategists are not shy about pointing out that the alliance with Seoul “has long served as an anchor for U.S. presence throughout the Asia-Pacific region” and that “South Korea is the only place on the Asian continent with a U.S. military foothold (Cronin & Lee 2016)”. And, Beijing hardly trusts the assurances of the US's top leaders that they “do not seek an excuse to garrison U.S. troops north of the Demilitarized Zone [DMZ] (Tillerson & Mattis 2017)”. China is keen, at a minimum, not to allow any expansion of the US “foothold” beyond the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel, while its optimal outcome would be the complete withdrawal of US troops from the Korean Peninsula, effectively ending the US–Republic of Korea (ROK) alliance. Pyongyang's nuclear-missile program could help Beijing achieve this goal.

North Korea's mastery of ICBM capability will induce many Americans to ask themselves a question: are military bases in Korea worth the risk of losing Honolulu, Seattle or Los Angeles?

There are more reasons why China benefits from the existence of North Korea. The festering nuclear problem, if handled adroitly, provides Beijing with leverage over key issues of bilateral relations with Washington. For one, the DPRK's antics distract the US from China's creeping expansion in the South China Sea. Also, as an additional price for its cooperation on North Korea, Beijing could ask Washington to reduce its support of Taiwan. It should not be forgotten that the Korean and Taiwan problems are genetically linked. It was the start of the Korean War in 1950 that led President Harry Truman to extend the American security umbrella over Taiwan, which protects the island to this very day.

In a nutshell, China will not accept the DPRK's disappearance from the political map and will view its unruly neighbor as a geopolitical asset, for at least as long as there continues to exist a Sino–US strategic rivalry in East Asia and the Western Pacific.

## Russia

Russia's stakes in the Korean Peninsula are not as vital as China's. The Kremlin's top geopolitical concerns still lie in Europe and the Middle East, rather than in East Asia. However, there are indications that the Kremlin is looking to play a more active role in the North Korea game. Many in Washington view Russia's desire to insert itself into North Korean diplomacy primarily as a way to assert itself as a great power to be reckoned with. Russia could also use its involvement in Korean affairs to gain extra leverage against the US (Rogin 2017). This may well be true, even though one should not dismiss Moscow's earnest willingness to help defuse a crisis fraught with the risk of a major, probably nuclear, war close to Russian borders.

In pursuing its North Korea diplomacy, Russia has displayed increasingly close collaboration with China. During the Moscow summit between Putin and Xi Jinping in early July, Russia and China called for a “dual freeze” deal, which means a North Korean moratorium on nuclear and missile tests in exchange for a halt to US–ROK military exercises. Remarkably, it was the first time that China and Russia have so clearly and unambiguously articulated their common position with respect to North Korea. The two foreign ministries issued a joint statement (2017), in which Moscow and Beijing explicitly linked their assistance in reining in the bellicose Kim regime to America's willingness to make major strategic concessions in Northeast Asia.

In the document, Russia and China insist that “allied relations between separate states should not inflict damage on the interests of third parties” and express opposition to “any military presence of extra-regional forces in Northeast Asia”, as well as “the deployment of THAAD antimissile systems.” The statement ends with Russia and China vowing “to protect the two countries’ security interests and to ensure a strategic balance in the region.” In other words, China and Russia want the US to weaken its predominant strategic grip on Northeast Asia, at least with respect to the Korean Peninsula and the US–ROK alliance. Unless the US agrees to a new security architecture in the region, one in which its political-military footprint in Northeast Asia shrinks considerably, Beijing and Moscow are willing to keep North Korea afloat.

Sino–Russian diplomatic coordination was again on display when on September 11, 2017, the UN Security Council passed a sanctions resolution, punishing North Korea for its latest nuclear test. Albeit unhappy with the powerful North Korean nuclear blast that on September 3 shook buildings in northeast China and far-eastern Russia, Beijing and Moscow took care to soften this resolution, removing from its draft the US-proposed strangulating provisions, such as a complete oil embargo.<sup>1</sup>

It is China and Russia that currently hold the exclusive keys to the DPRK’s survival, holding veto power at the UN Security Council and providing North Korea with export markets, fuel supplies and transportation links with the outside world. Without active collaboration from Beijing and Moscow, Washington is powerless to resolve the North Korea nuclear problem. Russia and China are likely to continue coordinating closely on North Korea. As Gilbert Rozman (2017) aptly points out, North Korea has been the primary test of the US–China–Russia strategic triangle in Asia, and Russia has sided with China.

### **Sino–Russian Collaboration in a North Korean Contingency**

The real importance of Sino–Russian collaboration on the Peninsula may be revealed in the case of a future North Korean contingency. Although the collapse of the DPRK’s current regime is by no means imminent, the situation in the North is fundamentally unpredictable. The regime may implode due to economic difficulties caused by mounting sanctions, a palace coup or

as a result of an outbreak in hostilities on the Peninsula. China is widely expected to undertake a military intervention in the event of a North Korea collapse (Page 2017). However, Beijing may well prefer to have Russia actively engaged, too.

Apart from China and the ROK, Russia is the only other country neighboring North Korea. Unlike the DMZ, the North’s border with Russia is not heavily guarded or militarized. This makes it easier for Russia to move its units, jointly with China, into the DPRK. Russia’s rich experience in carrying out military and hybrid warfare operations in recent years—from Georgia to Crimea to Syria—will certainly be a valuable asset for China, which has not tested its armed forces in actual combat since 1979 when it launched an offensive against Vietnam. Perhaps even more importantly, Russia’s strategic forces will help hold the US at bay lest Washington tries to send troops north of the DMZ without Beijing and Moscow’s consent. Putin’s bold intervention in the Middle East underscored Russia’s increased willingness—and capacity—to undertake military gambles in foreign countries.

Swift coordinated actions by China and Russia will guarantee that the outcome of a North Korean contingency will be in accordance with their geopolitical interests. They would aim for the stabilization of the North and the installment of a new regime loyal to China and friendly to Russia, while preventing the absorption of the DPRK by the South. If China and Russia act in lockstep in a future North Korean crisis, Washington and Seoul will be virtually helpless to secure their desired scenario of annexation of the North by the South.

Intervening in the North, China and Russia will rely on the DPRK elite. The North Korean ruling class is well aware of the unenviable fate that befell East Germany’s communist establishment after Germany’s unification. Indeed, in a unified Korea, the DPRK’s aristocracy would likely get a much harsher treatment than in Germany’s case. Such considerations are bound to lead the North’s elite to fully collaborate with China and Russia.

Of course, Beijing is the lead player in this tandem because, of the two, it has by far the highest stakes in the Korean Peninsula and wields the most leverage with respect to Pyongyang. In exchange for Moscow’s backing on North Korea, China will acknowledge certain Russian interests in the North and reciprocate by showing understanding of Russia’s interests in the regions of top concern to Moscow, such as the post-Soviet space and the Middle East.

### **Conclusion**

The ever closer Sino–Russian collaboration on North Korea is just one element of their “comprehensive strate-

1 *Comment* by the Information and Press Department of Russia’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs on the adoption of UNSC Resolution 2375 regarding the Korean Peninsula nuclear problem. Sept. 13, 2017.

gic partnership”, which, under Trump, has only grown tighter. Russia and China definitely do not relish the prospect of a nuclear-armed North Korea. Moreover, Putin and Xi feel no sympathy for Kim Jong Un, who openly defies not only Washington, but also Beijing and Moscow. That said, Russian and Chinese aversion to Kim Jong Un and his nukes is eclipsed by their shared

animosity to what they perceive as the US pretensions to hegemony. The Kim regime thrives on the distrust and rivalry among great and major powers, especially the US versus China and Russia. Ultimately, the North Korean nuclear menace is a symptom of the dysfunctional state of the current international order, in which its premier players are not capable of working together.

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## ANALYSIS

# Deciphering the Eurasian Potential of the Russia–Vietnam Comprehensive Strategic Partnership

By Evgeny Kanaev (National Research University Higher School of Economics, Moscow)

## Abstract

Established in 2012, the comprehensive strategic partnership between Russia and Vietnam has yet to live up to its name in terms of both vision and action. Nevertheless, Russian–Vietnamese cooperation is embedded in Russia’s emerging Eurasian priorities. Indeed, Russia’s prospective plans for its relations with ASEAN within the context of the Greater Eurasia Partnership strategy could serve to unlock the potential of the partnership between Russia and Vietnam, making it truly comprehensive and strategic.

In 2012, Russia and Vietnam raised their relations to the level of a comprehensive strategic partnership. Judging by its name, the Russia–Vietnam relationship is something grandiose in terms of both vision and action. At the same time, however, the substance of this partnership remains unclear, while practical results from their cooperation are modest at best. From a conceptual perspective, attempts to specify the essence of a comprehensive strategic partnership do not clarify much. No Russian think-tank or practical agency of relevance to the formulation and implementation of foreign policy, including Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, offers a strict and unambiguous definition. From a practical perspective, in late 2016 Moscow and Hanoi both raised their

eyebrows at one another’s choices, after Russia conducted joint naval exercises with China in the South China Sea and Vietnam abandoned its much-advertised plans to construct the Ninh Thuan-1 nuclear power plant with Russian participation. Academic reflections on the nature of a comprehensive strategic partnership would note that “comprehensive” means all-embracing, while “strategic” indicates sustained and long-term cooperation. However, this conclusion would suggest that a comprehensive strategic partnership fits perfectly with even the most severely strained relations—for instance, that between Russia and the Ukraine. Taking this into account, what value does the establishment of a “comprehensive strategic partnership” add to the relationship between Russia and Vietnam?

“If the problem cannot be solved, enlarge it”. This famous quote by D. Eisenhower may be applied to the Russian–Vietnamese comprehensive strategic partnership, whereby approaching it through the prism of a broader—Greater Eurasian—lens might well lead it to deliver precisely what the name of this partnership suggests: a truly strategic and comprehensive relationship.

### **Russia’s Asian Strategy: from Pivot to the East to the Greater Eurasian Partnership**

Starting with the preparations for the APEC Summit in Vladivostok, Russia’s pivot to the Asia-Pacific region has had to cope with new international and domestic realities. The Ukraine crisis marked the failure of Russian plans to establish a “Small Eurasia”, by means of re-integrating the post-Soviet space with Russia as its geopolitical center. The announcement of China’s mega-strategy “One Belt, One Road” (OBOR) has left Russia with few options other than to actively engage in the Asia-Pacific, rather than taking the position of a disinterested observer. Lastly, but importantly, Russia has begun to receive some modest interim results from its pivot to the East, with the key success stories being its regular role in high-level summits. In substantial terms, however, Russia’s pivot to the East was quickly becoming its pivot to China (see for e.g. Gabuev 2015).

Reflecting on these trends, as well as the problems in its Euro-Atlantic foreign policy, Russia choose to reset its foreign policy course. As a result, the Greater Eurasian Partnership (GEP) has come to the forefront of Moscow’s priorities, as a new mega-project allowing Russia to integrate its Eurasian and Asia-Pacific foreign policy vectors. Considering that the development of OBOR is inevitable, Russia wants to avoid a scenario in which Chinese economic possibilities will translate into political predominance in Eurasia. This aim is to be realized by multi-level and multi-dimensional balancing of China with Eurasian actors. Among the various instruments, the “integration of integrations” scheme that seeks to build up connections between ASEAN, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), coupled with the invitation for the EU to join the Greater Eurasia project, has become a subject of reflection among Russian experts (Karaganov 2017a; Kanaev 2016). In this way, Russia’s pivot to the East is now viewed as part of the GEP (Karaganov 2017b).

At the official level, the GEP is becoming part of Russia’s political vernacular. Notably, Vladimir Putin’s speeches at the Saint Petersburg Economic Forum and Eastern Economic Forum in 2016 stressed a connection between the GEP and the development of the Russian Far East. This was reiterated at the Belt and Road Forum

in May 2017. At the 2017 Eastern Economic Forum, the development of Russia’s Far East was portrayed by the Russian President as a natural part of the wider Eurasian agenda of cooperation and co-development. But most significantly, the aim of “establishing a common, open and non-discriminatory economic partnership and joint development space for ASEAN, SCO and EAEU members with a view to ensuring that integration processes in Asia-Pacific and Eurasia are complementary” is now outlined in the Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation.

It would be a simplification to suggest that Russia’s pivot to the Asia-Pacific is losing its significance. However, there is a shift in emphasis, whereby Russia’s pivot to the Asia-Pacific region is now seen as embedded in a broader—Greater Eurasian—strategic discourse.

### **The Implicit Eurasian Dimension of the Russia–ASEAN Strategic Partnership**

The decision to raise Russia–ASEAN relations to the level of a strategic partnership was made at the May 2016 Russia–ASEAN Commemorative Summit in Sochi. Although this relationship still faces numerous systemic obstacles, as elucidated on in a previous RAD article (Sumsky & Kanaev 2014), an upward trend is becoming more evident. Arguably, the significance of ASEAN for Russia, and vice versa, is rising due to their shared interest in expanding the scope of their cooperation from Southeast Asia to a broader Eurasian area.

From the ASEAN perspective, this corresponds to its aim of increasing its global significance, as outlined in the ASEAN Community Blueprint 2025 and Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity 2025. The implementation of these plans will crucially depend upon financial injections from ASEAN external partners to develop transnational infrastructure. In light of this, ASEAN has no other choice than to integrate Southeast Asia into the prospective plans of its partners. Therefore, engaging with Eurasian connectivity projects involving Russia, such as participation in the integrating the EAEU and the Silk Road Economic Belt or the North–South International Transport Corridor, is in many ways in ASEAN’s interests.

For the ASEAN states, the threat of international terrorism generated by ISIS is raising in significance. Among the examples of terrorist acts in 2014–2017, the Marawi crisis in the Philippines in 2017 is particularly worthy of note (Pablo 2017). As ISIS suffers losses in the Middle East, its militants are moving to other regions. In the view of ISIS, Southeast Asia with its large Muslim populations, ethnic tensions and the Rohingya factor cannot but deserve close attention. In these circumstances, Russia, with its experience and success in

fighting ISIS in the Middle East, becomes a valuable partner for the association.

Perhaps most importantly, the present stage of global development, overlapping with ASEAN's 50-year anniversary, presents the association with existential challenges. As the Russian expert V. Sumsky has observed, this stage of development means that ASEAN has had to say farewell to its previous illusions that the end of Soviet–American confrontation had finished the period of wars and marked the advent of an “eternal peace”. The current context has also led ASEAN to realize that integration with US-led globalization will not deliver maximal benefits for its member states, and that the extent of the contradictions within Sino–US relations works to undermine the prospects for the establishment of an efficient Asia-Pacific economic and security system. In this scenario, what will happen to the much-praised principles of ASEAN centrality and the ASEAN Way in regional multilateral dialogue venues? (Sumsky 2017).

In the system of Asia-Pacific multilateral cooperation as we know it today, these problems cannot be resolved. The Russian GEP project has the potential to contribute to a cooperative global developmental paradigm, decessing ASEAN's above-mentioned apprehensions. In an institutional framework of ASEAN–SCO–EAEU, the association can be given the status of the driving force, which will strengthen its internal unity and raise its global credentials. In its turn, Russia will only welcome cooperation as part of its GEP on the basis of the ASEAN way's famous principles that focus upon consensus and compromise.

From the Russian perspective, its comprehensive and multi-faceted strategic partnership with ASEAN is viewed through the lens of its Eurasian priorities. Russia can correct the overly pro-Chinese bent in its Asia-Pacific policy. It is not in Russia's interests to further abandon its policy of neutrality in the South China Sea. The aforementioned 2016 Russian–Chinese naval drills generated understandable concerns in many Asia-Pacific states. Cooperation with ASEAN in the establishment of a Eurasian system of security and cooperation would allow Russia to avoid siding too closely with China on the South China Sea disputes, ensuring Russia's policy is more balanced and, by implication, efficient.

In outlining the key reasons driving the “Eurasian” motivation of Russia and ASEAN to move towards a strategic partnership with one another, it is worth reiterating that apart from mutual planning, response and implementation of programs contributing to a polycentric global order (as only this order gives each the prospect of an advantageous future), they can together offer the world another model of globalization, via coopera-

tion with like-minded partners that is institutionalized within the format ASEAN–SCO–EAEU.

### **Russia–Vietnam Comprehensive Strategic Partnership**

How does the Russia–Vietnam comprehensive strategic partnership impact on the common Russia–ASEAN demand for cooperation in Eurasia? Seen from Russia's perspective, in a big way.

Vietnam is the only ASEAN state with which Russia, as part of the EAEU, has a Free Trade Agreement (FTA). With the course of time, this arrangement with Vietnam can be expanded to the level of a Russia–ASEAN or a EAEU–ASEAN FTA, based on the institutional mechanisms and established practices of cooperation outlined above.

Vietnam is one of the few ASEAN countries that displays interest in joining Russia's projects in the Arctic. Examples include agreements between Russian and Vietnamese energy companies to launch cooperation in the Yamal-Nenets Autonomous Area and the Pechora Sea. The prospective exploration and transportation of Arctic oil to Southeast Asia contributes to Russia's strategy of strengthening trans-Eurasian connectivity.

As part of the Russia–ASEAN strategic partnership, the growing cooperation between Russian and Vietnam will correct imbalances in the GEP. Its continental direction, exemplified by cooperation between Russia and China, will be supplemented by the maritime one, between Russia and Vietnam and by implication Russia and ASEAN, in the strategically important South China Sea.

From the Vietnamese perspective, the comprehensive strategic partnership with Russia is also seen through the Eurasian prism. Within China's OBOR vision, two land routes of the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Maritime Silk Road are expected to run through Southeast Asia. For Vietnam, with its complicated historical relationship with China, the task of balancing Chinese growing influence with much broader cooperative frameworks is gaining in prominence. This is all the more important, because integration in multilateral formats remains among the key priorities of Vietnamese foreign policy (see Central Committee of the Communist Party of Vietnam 2017). As a result, the GEP, institutionalized within the format ASEAN–SCO–EAEU, is likely to receive a welcome response from Hanoi.

As both the Russia–Vietnam and Russia–ASEAN partnerships are still at their initial stages and in search of their strategic missions, these tasks should be intertwined. Using the Russia–Vietnam comprehensive strategic partnership as an instrument to establish the

Russia–ASEAN strategic partnership, with a focus upon the GEP, will serve to unlock the potential of coopera-

tion between Russia and Vietnam, making it unarguably both strategic and comprehensive.

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**ABOUT THE RUSSIAN ANALYTICAL DIGEST**

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