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## In Search of Prestige and a Lost Position: Russia's Policy in the Korean Policy\*\*

### Abstract

Since the fall of the USSR, Russia has been trying to improve its position in the Korean Peninsula. In the 1990s this ended in almost total failure. Only in the 2000s did one see an improvement in Russia's position: Moscow was able to balance its position in the Peninsula, achieve good relations with both Koreas and was invited to Six-Party Talks. Unfortunately, these beneficial circumstances did not last long. Since then Russia has been a rather non-active international player in the Peninsula, which has usually been bound up to Chinese actions. Hence, despite the ups and downs, Russia's position since 1991 has been quite constant – that of a secondary great power in Korea.

### Introduction

Russia has been active in the Korean Peninsula since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It had its moment of superiority in the aftermath of WWII when the USSR controlled half of the Peninsula. Although the DPRK was able to distance itself from Moscow in the 1960s, the USSR remained influential in North Korea until the end of a Soviet era. This all changed in the 1990s when Russia's position diminished significantly. Since President Vladimir Putin's first term Russia has been trying to restore its position in order to boost its international profile. Nevertheless, the results are mixed: Moscow's importance has improved in comparison to Yeltsin's time, though it is still far behind the Soviet level and unlikely to develop further.

### Theoretical introduction: realism and Russia's great power syndrome

This article deals with Russia's policy in the Korean Peninsula since the early 1990s, from the perspective of political science. It will be based theoretically on the realistic approach to international relations,

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combining two sub-schools that emerged from classical political realism: neorealism and neoclassical realism.

The realist school of international relations claims that the archaic, Hobbesian, character of the international system forces states to provide for their own security and interests; power relations dominate at the expense of values. The realists believe that although since the 19<sup>th</sup> century the world has changed, become more globalized and interdependent, with more international institutions striving to make it a better place, and although the language of politics has changed to become more inclusive, nevertheless states' behaviour is still based on traditional, *realpolitik* imperatives: national interests, national security, power projection, management of the strategic balance and emphasis on the primacy of state sovereignty. To put it simply: "interests come before values."<sup>1</sup>

In Russia, realism (in its different forms) remains the dominant school of political thinking, though naturally embodied in a local understanding, vocabulary and discourse: "the ruling elites in Moscow and Beijing have been brought up in a strategic realist culture that emphasises the element of struggle in an often viciously competitive world, where power relations dominate at the expense of allegedly universal values"<sup>2</sup>. In the Russian vision of *Realpolitik* the world is characterised by a constant struggle for power: "war or the preparation for a new war became the way Russian civilisation has survived"<sup>3</sup>. In the Russian worldview, power relations dominate at the expense of allegedly universal values. Moscow rejects the Western idea of progress (e.g. North Korean crisis Russian have been unconcerned about non-proliferation) and considers the "US primacy and unipolarity as a temporary aberration of international politics."<sup>4</sup> Thus, Russia's political behaviour is "based on traditional, 19th century *Realpolitik* imperatives: national security, power projection, management of the strategic balance and emphasis on the primacy of state sovereignty"; the only difference is the discourse: the Russians have learned to use more modern and inclusive language. Instead of a zero-sum

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<sup>1</sup> Kaplan, Robert, *The Realist Creed*, Stratfor, 19.11.2014, accessed June 1, 2016.

<sup>2</sup>Bobo Lo, *The Axis of Convenience. Russia, China and the New Geopolitics*, London-New York 2008, p. 176.

<sup>3</sup>Bobo Lo, L. Shevtsova, *A 21st Century Myth. Authoritarian Modernization in Russia and China*, Carnegie Center Moscow 2012, p. 14.

<sup>4</sup> Marcin Kaczmarek, *Russia-China Relations in the Post-Crisis International Order*, London-New York 2014, p. 138 and 147.

calculus or balance of power, they speak of interdependency and universal threats and challenges”<sup>5</sup>.

Great power syndrome has been another important feature in analysing Russian conduct<sup>6</sup>. The conviction of Russia’s cultural and moral superiority that predestinates it to become a superpower is an imperative deeply rooted in the Russian mentality. The historical process of creating the Russian identity made it inseparably tied with the imperial tradition; Russia existed not so much in time, as in space<sup>7</sup>. The Russian concept of nation-building was a concept of expansion: the Russians cared more about conquering more lands than about economic, political or cultural development<sup>8</sup>. Being a superpower remains a key aspect of the Russian mentality. This superpower status, however, not understood in the classical aspects of political science (power as a state with force and resources) but rather “in reference to the 19th century’s vague metaphysical concepts of an empire as a global leader and an exclusive centre of culture, statehood and spirituality”<sup>9</sup>. The great power syndrome still has an important, if not a decisive influence on how Russia functions. This is associated with the “need for recognition and respect,” which was undermined by the USSR’s fall<sup>10</sup>. For historical reasons, Russia possesses a great need to be recognised by other subjects. This is a “complex phenomenon, known as an affiliation conjunction: recognition of oneself is based on being recognised by others whom one recognises.” As Leonid Radzikhovski put it, the Russians have a giant need for respect, but throughout the centuries, the fear was the only means of being respected that they had mastered was: “if someone is afraid of us, then he will

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<sup>5</sup> Bobo Lo, *op. cit.*, p. 3-174; A. Petersen, K. Barysch, *Russia, China and the geopolitics of energy in Central Asia*, CRR Report 2011,16 XI.

<sup>6</sup> For more, see: Michał Lubina, *Russia-China. A Political Marriage of Convenience*, Budrich Publishers, Opladen-Berlin-Toronto 2017, p. 32-38.

<sup>7</sup> M. Nizioł, *Dylematy kulturowe międzynarodowej roli Rosji (The Cultural Dilemmas of Russia’s International Role)*, Lublin 2004, p. 67-71.

<sup>8</sup> This comes from a specific attitude towards the land; territory here is almost sacred, R. Bäcker, *Rosyjskie myślenie polityczne za czasów prezydenta Putin (Russian political thinking during president Putin’s)*, Toruń 2007, p. 18.

<sup>9</sup> D. Orieszkin, *Imperialny projekt Rosji – smutna perspektywa (The Imperial Project of Russia – a Sad Perspective)*, [w:] *Imperium Putina (Putin’s Empire)*, Warszawa 2007, p. 166.

<sup>10</sup> S. Bieleń, *Tożsamość międzynarodowa Federacji Rosyjskiej (International Identity of the Russian Federation)*, Warszawa 2006, p. 31.

respect us”<sup>11</sup>. This is where the need for a great power status and Putin’s popularity is coming from: “Russia pays a lot of attention to being treated and perceived as an equal and as one of the key decision makers in a multipolar world order; this self-perception as a great power is closely related to the syndrome of humiliation that Russia feels it experienced at the end of the Cold War; by imagining the state as a great power, the Russian elite hopes to overcome and compensate for the period of smuta (trouble and depression) of the 1990s”.<sup>12</sup> Thus, the current Russian leadership has been building a national identity on rebuilding the Russian state’s great power status. The worldview of the contemporary Russian elites synthesises the Russian Empire and the Soviet traditions and may be characterised as “moderate neo-imperialism”. It promotes the zone of influence (CIS) and bases on the archetype of space and claim on the geo-strategic and cultural uniqueness of Russia<sup>13</sup>. Russia’s pillars of “great power” (*derzhavnost’*) are traditional: sheer geographic size, a vast nuclear arsenal and abundant natural resources: “Russian policy makers tend to view the world through a Cartesian lens: ‘we think we are a great power, therefore we are’; self-aggrandisement and mythmaking are as important as substance in promoting the idea of Russia as globally influential player”<sup>14</sup>.

This statement means that no matter who is in the head of Russia, foreign policy will follow imperialistic aims. But this is not so when we look at the foreign policy of the Yeltsin government. An excessive tendency to generalise one vision of Russian foreign policy strategy leads to some misinterpretations of those factors which determine Russian foreign strategy, depending on the period. In private, the domestic factors seem to be ignored here. For example, the war in Eastern Ukraine, in which Russia has been involved, was not caused only by Putin’s ambitions to regain the status of superpower. The causes are more complicated. I would not simplify the interpretation of Russia’s involvement in this war, analysing it from the point of superpower

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<sup>11</sup> L. Radzichowski, *Traktat o szacunku (The Treaty on Respect)*, „Newsweek (Poland)” 2007, 20 IV.

<sup>12</sup> Marcin Kaczmarek, *Russia-China Relations...* p. 44.

<sup>13</sup> J. Fiedorow, *Rosyjskie supermocarstwo: mity i rzeczywistość (Russian Superpower: Myths and Reality)*, [in] *Ibidem*, p. 121, p. 64-74; Bobo Lo, L. Shevtsova, *op. cit.*, p. 139.

<sup>14</sup> Bobo Lo, *op. cit.*, p. 81.

ambitions. But this is one of several cases for rethinking the wider approaches to the Russian foreign strategy.

This great power status syndrome has important implications for Russian policy in the Korean Peninsula, as Korea is another playground for improving Russia's international position.

### **“The concert of Asia”: the conceptual source of Russia's policy in the Korean Peninsula**

Moscow's general vision of international relations is based on a soft rejection of the current system which the Kremlin consider unjust and wants to modify it into a better one: a “new model of international relations” that supports Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence and stands against Western unilateralism<sup>15</sup> This approach places Moscow in the “coalition of the unwilling”<sup>16</sup> – it hails multipolarity, objects to the Western use of force (military interventions sanctioned by universal values), defends territorial integrity and state sovereignty form of external interference, and detests democratisation attempts.<sup>17</sup> At the top of the list is the importance of a strong state that enjoys full freedom of action internationally”.<sup>18</sup>

Russian perception is based on a certain vision of the international system, based on combating American hegemony in international relations, albeit softly – Russia represents “soft balancing” against the US hegemony.<sup>19</sup> Instead of unilateral hegemony, Russia dreams of the 21st century's equivalent of the 19th century “concert of powers”, with its rough equivalence between major powers and strategic checks and

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<sup>15</sup> Михаил Титаренко, *Геополитическое значение Дальнего Востока. Россия, Китай и другие страны Азии*, Москва 2008, p. 269-271. Russia-China joint communiques/declarations are particularly illustrating in this regard, see e.g. *Совместное заявление Российской Федерации и Китайской Народной Республики о всестороннем углублении российско-китайских отношений партнерства и стратегического взаимодействия*, Президент России. Официальный сайт, 2010, 27 IX

<sup>16</sup> David Shambaugh, *Chinese thinking about World Order*, [in:] *China and the International System. Becoming a World Power*, ed Xiaoming Huang, Robert Putnam, London-New York 2013, p. 9.

<sup>17</sup> See for example: *Совместная Декларация Российской Федерации И Китайской Народной Республики О Международном Порядке В XXI Веке*, 27.02.2006, www.mid.ru.

<sup>18</sup> Dmitri Trenin, *From Greater Europe to Greater Asia? The Sino-Russian Entente*, Carnegie Center, 09.04.2015

<sup>19</sup> Chaka Ferguson, *The Strategic Use of Soft Balancing: The Normative Dimensions of the Chinese-Russian 'Strategic Partnership'*, *Journal of Strategic Studies* 35, no. 2 (2012).

balances to restrain hegemonic influences. Thus it proposes “exclusive clubs”<sup>20</sup> of great powers, where those powers would not be restrained by others’ actions and would act in accordance with concert of powers’ logic. The “relations between powers in a new, polycentric international order” preferred by Moscow “should be based on an oligarchic consensus of great powers, civilisational pluralism, the de-ideologisation of interstate relations, the absolute non-interference in the internal affairs of ‘great powers’, respect for their spheres of influence, and the prioritization of business co-operation”<sup>21</sup>.

This 19<sup>th</sup> “concert of powers” logic has been serving as a theoretical, conceptual source for Russian policy making in the Korean Peninsula since the early 2000s. The “Concert of Asia” is a kind of great powers’ condominium supervising the region, where they would collectively deal with the most important issues in Asia-Pacific<sup>22</sup>. Moscow wanted to see “a strategic architecture of checks and balances” in East Asia which would have two cardinal virtues: it would restrain the exercise of hegemonic influence of Beijing and Washington and would allow secondary actors, such as Russia, a greater say in regional decision-making.<sup>23</sup> This ‘Concert of Asia’ logic has been applied by Russian diplomacy in the Korean Peninsula since 2000. It was born out of recognition of Russia’s weakness there; weakness caused by the fall of USSR and Yeltsin’s unskilled policy there.

### **The Disaster of the 1990s: Russian Korea policy during Yeltsin’s decade**

Since 1991, Russia has inherited the Soviet legacy in the Korean Peninsula: strong yet complicated relations with Pyongyang and weak yet promising relations with Seoul. The Kremlin had hoped to become a balancer in the region, but in due course lost its position completely. Moscow-Pyongyang relations deteriorated and reached their lowest point in bilateral history, while Moscow-Seoul promising cooperation did not materialise. The decade concluded with the 1998 disastrous economic crisis for Russia, which buried any hopes for an ambitious policy in the Peninsula.

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<sup>20</sup> Ibidem, p. 135.

<sup>21</sup> W. Rodkiewicz, *The Turn to the East...*, s. 6.

<sup>22</sup> A. Acharya, *A Concert of Asia?*, „Survival”, vol. 41, no 3 (Autumn 1999), p. 89.

<sup>23</sup> Bobo Lo, *op. cit.*, p. 123.

In the 1990s Russia's Korea policy was still burdened by history. Both Moscow and Pyongyang remembered that after initial Soviet hegemony, Kim Il-Sung was able to partially liberate himself from the Soviet's iron grip in the 1960s and has since then successfully maneuvered between Moscow and Beijing<sup>24</sup>. Despite official praises and common communistic ideology, Soviet-North Korean "brotherly relations" left a legacy of distrust, dislike and failed hopes for reunification (on North Korean side) and sense of North Korean betrayal, ungratefulness, and unpredictability for the Russian side. On the other hand, it produced a solid intellectual ground for both relations, as the USSR possessed an impressive amount of Korea specialists while DPRK's nomenclature was fluent in Russian. This intellectual heritage, however, was soon lost.

During perestroika period Gorbachev lost any interest in North Korea and recognized South Korea in 1990. He hoped for South Korean investments in the Russian Far East. In return for recognition of South Korea, Seoul granted USSR a \$3 billion loan, but Moscow had managed to receive only approx. 1/3 (\$1.47 billion) before the Soviet Union collapsed; once it happened Seoul suspended the rest of the loan<sup>25</sup>. Yeltsin has continued Gorbachev's redirection towards South Korea. He "sided unequivocally with Seoul"<sup>26</sup> for both ideological and economic reasons alike. Yeltsin has chose Seoul as the place of his first visit to the region and during his presidency Russia ceased to support the North Korean economy due to its own bad condition – in 1995 alone Russia's trade volume with South Korea was \$3.2 billion, while trade with DPRK dropped from \$3.5 billion in 1988 to \$100 million in the mid-1990s<sup>27</sup>. North Korea felt offended and DPRK-Russia relations hit a nadir: in 1990s "the North Korean press was full of horror stories about the chaos

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<sup>24</sup> More about Kim Il Sung and his relations with Russians, see (in English): Andrei Lankov, *From Stalin to Kim Il Sung: The Formation of North Korea, 1945-1960*, Rutgers 2003; Idem, *The Real North Korea: Life and Politics in the Failed Stalinist Utopia*, Oxford 2013; and (in Polish), Waldemar J. Dziak, *Kim Ir Sen. Dziel i polityczne wizje (Kim Il Sung and Political Visions)*, Warszawa 2001; Idem, *Korea Północna. U źródeł rodzinnej sukcesji władzy (North Korea. The Sources of Family Succession of Power)*, Warszawa 2009.

<sup>25</sup> A. N. Fedorovsky, *Russian Policy and interests in the Korean Peninsula*, [w:] Russia and Asia: The Emerging Security Agenda ed. G. Chuffrin, New York 1999, p. 394; Y. V. Tsyganov, *Russia and China. What is in the pipeline?* [in:] Ibid., p. 302.

<sup>26</sup> Bobo Lo, op. cit., p. 124.

<sup>27</sup> J. C. Moltz, *Russian Policy on the North Korean Nuclear Crisis*, Monterey Institute of International Studies, April 2003.

and suffering of the Russian people” due to the transformation from communism to capitalism<sup>28</sup>.

Moscow cared little about the DPRK, as it had high hopes for cooperation with South Korea. Russia, which had just (briefly) started believing in democracy, hoped that ideological convergence would help it in South Korea. The Kremlin had hoped to get into the South Korean market, which turned out to be wishful thinking, as this market had already been dominated by the USA and Japan. Moscow claimed that it was selling Seoul “defensive” arms, but tanks are hard to be considered as such; this enraged Pyongyang; to make matters worse, Seoul at the same time announced that it was accepting weapons as a part of a repayment of the Soviet loan. Nevertheless, Moscow offered South Korea rockets, but then the US moved in: Washington intervened and made the fulfillment of the contract impossible<sup>29</sup>. Russia’s half-hearted attempts in South Korea were completely abandoned after the 1998 economic crisis that effectively ruined Russia’s economic perspectives there.

Russian policy in the Korean Peninsula in the 1990s ended badly – Moscow’s position lowered dramatically in comparison to Soviet times. The Kremlin became marginalized and had no voice in the most important issues on the Korean Peninsula. The most visible sign of Russia’s weakness was its exclusion from North Korean nuclear programme peace negotiations – Russia was not included in four-party talks (USA, China and the two Koreas) and Pyongyang rejected the Russian offer of providing energy in return for abandoning the nuclear programme<sup>30</sup>. Moscow’s ambitions to mediate between two Koreas ended up in a failure too due to weak contacts with South Korea. Thus in the 1990s, Russia was not able to play the role of a balancer and reduced its position significantly in the region compared to Soviet times.

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<sup>28</sup> Andrei Lankov, *N Korea and Russia: A step towards a worldwide anti-hegemonic front?*, Al-Jazeera, 22.06.2014, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2014/06/n-korea-russia-step-toward-worl-201462253320470677.html> (access: 05.12.2016).

<sup>29</sup> Y. V. Tsyganov, op. cit., p. 302; H. Gelman, *The Changing Asia Area [in:] Rapprochement or Rivalry? Russia-China Relations in a Changing Asia*, ed. S.W. Garnett, Washington D.C. 2000, 403-408.

<sup>30</sup> Sang-Woo Rhee, *Russia and a new balance of power in East Asia: implications for stability on the Korean Peninsula*, [w:] *Russia and Asia...*, p. 404-410.

### **Putin's personal diplomacy and the Six-Party Talks**

Upon ascending to power in 2000, Putin decided to regain Russia's position in the Korean Peninsula. Since he knew he could not count on China (Beijing did not feel the need to invite Russia into Korean affairs)<sup>31</sup>, he opted for "personal diplomacy" to get Russia a seat at the negotiating table (he travelled to Pyongyang in June 2000; Kim Jong-il paid a revisit in August 2001 and in August 2002 (the next one, however, took place only in 2011)<sup>32</sup> – and he was proved right. Thanks to his rapprochement with Kim Jong-Il in the early 2000s, North Korea (not China!) proposed including Russia in six-party talks to maintain the balance<sup>33</sup> (from Pyongyang's perspective, Russia possessed several important assets: its veto right at the UN Security Council, opposition to the US and the possibility of discreet transfer of money via Russian banks).

North Korea policy making also helped Russia for a while. As most of East Asia has built its prosperity on peace and stability, North Korea chose to survive via constant provocations and political blackmails – it has brilliantly "made a living out of blackmail for 20 years now, having successfully mastered the role of a beggar with a stick"<sup>34</sup>. This corresponds well with Russian foreign policy making, which "thrives on a degree of uncertainty that enables it to pretend to greater influence than is actually the case (in such moments it is) able to assume the guise of a major player – a pretense unsustainable during the relatively peaceful 1990s (...) when the other powers were in a state of 'controlled' but tense

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<sup>31</sup> L. Buszynski, *Overshadowed by China: The Russia-China Strategic Partnership in the Asia-Pacific Region*, [w:] *The Future of China-Russia Relations*, ed. Bellacqua, Kentucky 2010, p. 271.

<sup>32</sup> *Bilateral relations of Russia and DPRK*, Embassy of Russia to the DPRK, [on-line:] <http://www.rusembdprk.ru/en/russia-and-dprk> – 14 V 2014. In 2000 Russia and DPRK have signed treaty on friendship, good neighborhood and cooperation, *Договор о дружбе, добрососедстве сотрудничестве между Российской Федерацией и Корейской Народно-Демократической Республикой*, „Дипломатический Вестник” сентябрь 2000 год официальные материалы, [on-line:] [http://www.mid.ru/bdomp/dip\\_vest.nsf/99b2ddc4f717c733c32567370042ee43/711eab749094784c32569840051161d!OpenDocument](http://www.mid.ru/bdomp/dip_vest.nsf/99b2ddc4f717c733c32567370042ee43/711eab749094784c32569840051161d!OpenDocument) – 14 V 2014.

<sup>33</sup> Л.В. Забровская, *Шестисторонние переговоры: проблемы и перспективы*, [in:] *Корея: Взгляд из России*, Москва 2007, p. 8-29.

<sup>34</sup> Yu Bin, *Pivot to Eurasia and Africa: Xi Style*, „Comparative Connections” 2013, vol. 15, no 1, [on-line:] [http://csis.org/files/publication/1301qchina\\_russia.pdf](http://csis.org/files/publication/1301qchina_russia.pdf) (access: 05.12.2016)

balance, even a modest Russian input could prove surprisingly effective”<sup>35</sup>.

This was the case with the six-party talks: participation in these talks was Russia’s biggest success on the Korean Peninsula in the 2000s. Moscow had hoped that these talks would herald the new Northeast Asian regionalism that would sustain Russian presence in the Korean Peninsula<sup>36</sup>. This clearly showed how Russia perceives the idea of the “concert of Asia” – as a great powers’ condominium that deals collectively with regional problems (here: the North Korean nuclear programme); Russia, even as a peripheral member, still remained at the negotiating table, which was important for Moscow for reasons of prestige. This is how Russia achieved its most important goal of rebuilding its position, at least partially, after the USSR’s fall and the disastrous 1990s<sup>37</sup>.

Putin’s success, too, was balancing Russia policy vis a vis both Koreas (during Soviet times Pyongyang had dominated the picture while during Yeltsin’s era it was Seoul). Putin, on the other hand, “has managed the considerable feat of simultaneously improving relations with both Koreas (though of course this improvement is asymmetrical: political in the case of Russia-DPRK relations, economic in Russia-ROK relations); this balancing act not only highlights the Kremlin’s commitment to strategic diversity but also reflects an understanding that the best chance of playing an active part in East Asia affairs is to portray Russia as a ‘good regional citizen’ committed to positive-sum outcomes”<sup>38</sup>. Unfortunately for Russia, this is a false picture is difficult to sustain given Russian worldwide actions elsewhere (during crises, such as Georgian and Ukrainian, Russia behaves in the non-Asian way: it resolves to force which time deepens the perception of Russia’s cultural and civilizational strangeness to Asia). To make matters worse, Russia’s hopes for biggest posture on Korean Peninsula were built on the idea of six-party talks’ success, and this success turned out to short-lived.

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<sup>35</sup> Bobo Lo, op. cit., p. 125.

<sup>36</sup> Buszynski, op. cit., p. 277; for Russian perspective on the talks, see: Александр З. Жебин, Ким Ен Ун, *Перемены на Корейском полуострове: вызовы и возможности*, Проблемы Дальнего Востока. - 2008. - N 2. - p. 83-100

<sup>37</sup> А. И.Мацегора, *Современная политика России на Корейском полуострове*, [in:] *Россия и Корея в меняющемся мире*, Москва 2014, p. 14-19.

<sup>38</sup> Bobo Lo, op. cit., p. 124.

Six-party talks collapsed due to the actions of the North Korea which in 2006 conducted nuclear weapons testing. Until then the international community was convinced that Pyongyang was bluffing; now it became obvious that it possesses nuclear weapons. That meant further isolation of the DPRK and beginning of the end of the six-party talks (formally the last talks took place in 2008, but since the nuclear weapons testing it became clear that the problem would not be resolved through negotiations)<sup>39</sup>. All powers reacted strongly, even China which “lost face” – North Korea showed in public that China did not control it (until now nobody does). Despite that, China was able to digest this bitter pill and proved its pragmatism once again: despite the lowering of diplomatic ties, after 2009 Sino-North Korean economic relations intensified – China started investing heavily in North Korea in order to prevent the DPRK’s collapse<sup>40</sup>. China, therefore, fulfilled its main goals – to vassalise North Korea and to prevent Korea from unification. As for the Russian policy after the 2009 stalemate, it usually joined China in joint actions on North Korea<sup>41</sup> and did not try to conduct an overly ambitious policy.<sup>42</sup> Thus, North Korea’s uncompromising stance had limited Russia’s options to maneuver in the Korean Peninsula.

### **Great Plans, Little Results: Russia-South Korea Relations**

Unfulfilled opportunities for Russia for playing a bigger role thanks to the Six-Party Talks have been complemented by equally unfulfilled chances for intensification of relations with South Korea. Russia has been dreaming of selling its resources to South Korea and attracting South Korean investments in Russian Far East for almost three decades now. The results, however are modest: far behind optimistic expectations.

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<sup>39</sup> *The Six-Party Talks at a Glance*, Arms Control Association, May 2012, <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/6partytalks> – 19 VI 2014.

<sup>40</sup> O. Pietrewicz, *Specjalne strefy ekonomiczne jako przyklad bardzo trudnego wprowadzania reform w Koreańskiej Republice Ludowo-Demokratycznej (SEZ as an example of difficult reforms in DPRK)*, [in:] J. Włodarski, K. Ziedler, M. Burdelski, *Korea w oczach Polaków (Korea in Poles’ eyes)*, Gdańsk 2012, s. 398-402; Idem, *U źródeł stanowiska Chińskiej Republiki Ludowej wobec Półwyspu Koreańskiego w świetle wydarzeń z lat 2009-2012 (The Genesis of CPR’s policy towards Korean Peninsula from the perspective of 2009-2012 events)*, [in:] J. Rowiński, O. Pietrewicz, *Półwysep Koreański: wyzwania i zagrożenia (Korean Peninsula: Challenges and Threats)*, Toruń 2013, p. 243-283.

<sup>41</sup> Александр З. Жебин, *События в Корее: взгляд из России*, [in:] *Россия и Корея...* p. 23-30.

<sup>42</sup> Marcin Kaczmarek, *Russia-China Relations...* p. 146.

The decade of the 2000s in Russia-South Korea relations went unnoticed despite some high profile summits<sup>43</sup>. At the beginning of the decade, Putin has called on Seoul<sup>44</sup>, Kim Dea-Jung and Roh Mu Hyun have both visited Moscow<sup>45</sup> and Russia has backed Seoul's "sunshine policy"<sup>46</sup>. But that's all: the failure of "sunshine policy" and six-party talks stalled RF-ROK relations, too.

The new dynamism was supposed to be inserted into Russia-South Korea relations with the inauguration of "Russia's pivot to Asia" (in 2010/2011; internationally from Vladivostok's APEC summit in 2012). The purpose of this "Russian pivot" was, again, the need to keep great power status: "three hundred years ago great power status dependent on position on the Baltic Sea and the Black Sea; now it depends on the position on the Pacific"<sup>47</sup>. Today "Russia is still a world power because of a long stretch of the Pacific coastline and what lies between the Pacific coast and the Urals: Siberia with its resources. Making full use of this potential is a passport to the future; failure to integrate the east would spell the demise of Russia as a major player"<sup>48</sup>. There was one implicit rationale of the pivot, too. It was to "reduce Moscow's rapidly growing political and economic Sinocentrism" – the notion behind it was that overdependence from China blocks Russian policy options<sup>49</sup>. Intensified relations with South Korea were hoped to partially balance the overdependence on China in Russia's Asia-Pacific policy.

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<sup>43</sup> For the academic, yet official view of bilateral relations, see: *Перспективы российско-корейских отношений на период до 2030 года*, DRRK, Seoul-Moskva 2013, [https://vk.com/doc358527\\_437478783?hash=f532ad655653654dd0&dl=298e0ccd45e012c27a](https://vk.com/doc358527_437478783?hash=f532ad655653654dd0&dl=298e0ccd45e012c27a) (Access: 05.12.2016).

<sup>44</sup> "Russia makes up lost ground with Korean proposals". *Asia Times*. 2001-02-27, <http://www.atimes.com/c-asia/CB28Ag01.html>, access: 01.12.2016.

<sup>45</sup> *В Москву с официальным визитом прибыл президент Республики Корея Но Му Хен*, 1TV, 20.09.2004, [http://www.1tv.ru/news/2004/09/20/239550-v\\_moskvu\\_s\\_ofitsialnym\\_vizitom\\_pribyl\\_prezident\\_respubliki\\_koreya\\_no\\_mu\\_hen](http://www.1tv.ru/news/2004/09/20/239550-v_moskvu_s_ofitsialnym_vizitom_pribyl_prezident_respubliki_koreya_no_mu_hen) (access: 01.12.2016).

<sup>46</sup> More on "sunshine policy" and its failure, *Sunshine Policy failed to change North Korea*: report, Reuters, 18.11.2010, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-korea-north-sunshine-idUSTRE6AH12520101118> (access: 05.12.2016).

<sup>47</sup>Ф. Лукьянов: *Мы и новая Азия*, Совет по внешней и оборонной политике, 2013, 11 XI.

<sup>48</sup>D. Trenin, *Moscow on the Pacific: the Missing Piece in the Pivot to Asia*, Carnegie Center Moscow, 2013, 30 X,

<sup>49</sup> Marcin Kaczmarek, *Russia-China Relations...* p. 102.

The beginning was good. In 2010, Russia and South Korea signed a memorandum on South Korean participation in Russia's Far East modernisation that included e.g. construction of a bilateral industrial complex in the Nakhodka Free Economic Area in Russia's Far East and gas-fields development in Irkutsk (Eastern Siberia)<sup>50</sup>. This memorandum was an important message then – “a strong political signal, as a similar memorandum with China was signed only a year later” – but proved to be a gesture only: “the implementation of Russia's Korea concepts proved, yet again, problematic and Russia has not achieved any breakthrough so far”.<sup>51</sup> The same story repeated itself in 2013, when during the Russian-South Korean summit in 2013<sup>52</sup> both countries pledged to intensify cooperation in the development of the Russian Far East, agriculture, science, technology, space, military-technical equipment and many other areas<sup>53</sup>. The reality on the ground, however, is that most of the project remained on paper and the only breakthrough was in the human factor: during the summit Putin and Park Guen-Hye announced visa-free travel for citizens of both countries starting from 2014<sup>54</sup>. This indeed increased the number of Russian tourists in South Korea but tourism is a marginal issue in bilateral relations between the two countries.

What is much more important is that the grand “intra-Korean” plans have not materialised. During 2013 summit Putin proposed a trans-Korean railway (connected to the Transiberian railway) and trans-Korean pipeline; Seoul's answer under Park Guen-Hye was caution<sup>55</sup>. There were several reasons behind this agenda, such as Park's tough policy towards North Korea<sup>56</sup> and Seoul's lack of faith in the possibility of fulfillment of

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<sup>50</sup> РФ и Южная Корея заключили ряд соглашений о сотрудничестве, *izvestia.ru*, 10.11.2010

<sup>51</sup> Marcin Kaczmarski, *Russia-China Relations...* p. 104.

<sup>52</sup> *Официальный визит в Республику Корея*, Президент России. Официальный сайт, 13 XI 2013, [on-line:] <http://news.kremlin.ru/visits/19617> – 4 VI 2014.

<sup>53</sup> С 2014 года Россия и Южная Корея перейдут на безвизовый режим, *Российская газета* (13 ноября 2011) <http://www.rg.ru/2013/11/13/itogi-site.html> (access: 01.12.2016)

<sup>54</sup> С 2014 года Россия и Южная Корея перейдут на безвизовый режим, *Российская газета* (13 ноября 2011) <http://www.rg.ru/2013/11/13/itogi-site.html> (access: 01.12.2016)

<sup>55</sup> *Seoul Cautious on Putin's Far East Development Push*, *The Wall Street Journal Asia* 13 XI 2013, [on-line:] <http://blogs.wsj.com/korearealtime/2013/11/13/putin-arrives-in-seoul-on-far-east-development-push/> – 4 VI 2014.

<sup>56</sup> Although Park has called her policy towards North Korea a “trustpolitik” (see: Park Guen-Hye, *A New Kind of Korea*, *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 2011, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/northeast-asia/2011-09-01/new-kind-korea>, access: 05.12.2016; Tom Nagorski, *South Korea's New President Promises Era of 'Trustpolitik'*,

these grand projects and thus after 2013 nothing happened. Russian enthusiasm evaporated with time, too. The same applies to the idea of the gas pipeline via the Korean Peninsula from 2011-2012. It was conceived as potential leverage in negotiations with China, but the small size of it (10-bcm?) made it symbolic only, whereas the political risks involved undermined the idea from the very beginning; finally when Gazprom signed a big gas contract with Beijing in 2014, this made the “implementation of the (Korean) project almost impossible”.<sup>57</sup> The most important, long-term reason why those two grand projects have not materialised until now is simple: “necessary investments are too large given the political risks”<sup>58</sup>.

Thus, great plans have not materialised (as the pivot itself which turned out to be “flawed diversification of Russian foreign policy”)<sup>59</sup>. That is why FR-ROK relations despite being good and stable did not lead to the improvement of Russia’s position in the Peninsula.

### **The ephemeral intensification of Russia-DPRK relations**

In 2014, there appeared another opportunity for Russia to boost its profile on the Korean Peninsula; it happened from a surprising side: North Korea. Kim Jong-Un since his succession to power in 2011 has been trying to liberate the country from Chinese dependence and has at least partially diversify the foreign policy of the DPRK (the execution of pro-Chinese Jang Song-Taek was the most visible sign of these attempts)<sup>60</sup>. This was in accordance with the traditional North Korea foreign policy paradigm: North Korea’s elite has “always striven to have at least two (preferably mutually antagonistic) great power sponsors” (...) to extract the maximum amount of aid possible, while not coming under any undue influence”<sup>61</sup>. An understanding of the fact that economic overdependence on China is risky and worrisome, Pyongyang started attempts, at least

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Asia Society 25.02.2016, <http://asiasociety.org/blog/asia/south-koreas-new-president-promises-era-trustpolitik>, access: 05.12.2016), she has taken a harsh line against Pyongyang in return for its behavior, e.g. closing Keasong complex.

<sup>57</sup> Marcin Kaczmarski, *Russia-China Relations...* p. 106.

<sup>58</sup> Andrei Lankov, *N Korea and Russia...*

<sup>59</sup> W. Rodkiewicz, *The Turn to the East...*, p. 1-30.

<sup>60</sup> *Kim Jong Un's uncle Jang Song Thaek executed* in North Korea, Dailymail 12 XII 2013, [on-line:] <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2522859/Kim-Jong-Uns-uncle-Jang-Song-Thaek-executed-North-Korea-traitor.html> – 19 VI 2014.

<sup>61</sup> Andrei Lankov, *N Korea and Russia...*

partially, to fix it and balance China's influence<sup>62</sup>. Russia seemed to be a good partner to help improve the DPRK's position against China, so North Koreans reached out to the Kremlin.

Initially, Moscow was unconcerned by "Pyongyang's charm offensive"<sup>63</sup>. The Ukrainian crisis, however, changed the political dynamics. Russia, isolated from the West, decided that improving relations with North Korea also had a chance. Calling Russian actions an attempt to "create a worldwide anti-hegemonic front" is perhaps going too far, but certainly Moscow hoped "to divert US resources and also increase Moscow's bargaining power vis-a-vis Washington"<sup>64</sup>.

This explained the outburst of diplomatic activity between Russia and the DPRK. In the Spring of 2014, Alexander Galushka, Russian Minister for the Development of the Far East, and Yuri Trutnev, Russian Vice-Premier, called Pyongyang<sup>65</sup> in return for Kim Yong-nam, the North's formal head of state's attendance at the Sochi Olympics (he visited Sochi despite the fact the DPRK did not participate in the Olympics); there were also rumours of Kim Jong-Un's planned visit to Moscow for the Victory Parade on May 9<sup>th</sup>, 2015 (he didn't show up eventually)<sup>66</sup>. North Koreans, too, accepted the annexation of the Crimean peninsula by Russia<sup>67</sup>.

Soon concrete deals followed. Moscow canceled 90% of North Korean debts (\$11 billion)<sup>68</sup>, offered to build a gas pipeline and a railway to North Korean SEZ Rajin, as well as trans-Korean railway linked with Trans-Siberian Railway.<sup>69</sup> Moreover, Pyongyang and Moscow agreed

<sup>62</sup> Александр З. Жебин, *Корейский полуостров как узел противоречий великих держав*, [in:] *Азиатско-тихоокеанское сотрудничество и место России и место России в региональном развитии*, под ред. К.А.Кокорева, Е.В.Супониной, Б.М.Волхонского. Рос. ин-т стратег. исслед. – Москва, 2014, p. 107-113.

<sup>63</sup> Andrei Lankov, *N Korea and Russia...*

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> *Завершился визит Министра РФ по развитию Дальнего Востока Александра Габушки в КНДР*, Министерство Российской Федерации по развитию Дальнего Востока, 25.10.2014, [http://www.minvostokrazvitiya.ru/press-center/news\\_minvostok/?ELEMENT\\_ID=2508](http://www.minvostokrazvitiya.ru/press-center/news_minvostok/?ELEMENT_ID=2508) (Access: 05.12.2016); *Визит Юрия Трутнева в Северную Корею*, Правительство России, 29.04.2014, <http://government.ru/news/12080/> (Access: 05.12.2016).

<sup>66</sup> *Przyjaźń Korei Północnej i Rosji. Świat ma powody do obaw*, WP.pl, 23.03.2015, [http://wiadomosci.wp.pl/kat,1329,title,Przyjazn-Korei-Polnocnej-i-Rosji-Swiat-ma-powody-do-obaw,wid,17379510,wiadomosc.html?ticaid=11833d&\\_tictsrn=5](http://wiadomosci.wp.pl/kat,1329,title,Przyjazn-Korei-Polnocnej-i-Rosji-Swiat-ma-powody-do-obaw,wid,17379510,wiadomosc.html?ticaid=11833d&_tictsrn=5) (Access: 05.12.2016).

<sup>67</sup> Andrei Lankov, *N Korea and Russia...*

<sup>68</sup> *Russia, North Korea Sign Debt Pact*, „Wall Street Journal” 2012, 18 IX.

<sup>69</sup> Zachary Keck, *To Hedge Its Bets, Russia Is Encircling China*, *The Diplomat*, 05.11.2013,

that bilateral transactions would be done in Russian rubles instead of US dollars<sup>70</sup>, Russia started investing in North Korean SEZ in Rason<sup>71</sup> and North Koreans declared that Russian companies operating in North Korea would “enjoy a number of unprecedented privileges”: they would be allowed to use the internet without restriction and would be issued visas under greatly simplified regulations<sup>72</sup>. Particularly surprising was the DPRK’s eagerness to present exclusive terms for Russian businessmen, especially in developing mineral resources<sup>73</sup>. Finally, 2015 was declared the “year of Russian-Korean friendship”<sup>74</sup>.

The intensification of Moscow-Pyongyang relations, however, from the very beginning had been built on weak foundations<sup>75</sup>. It was more a political sign than the beginning of fruitful economic cooperation<sup>76</sup>. Economically speaking, the Russian-North Korean rapprochement matters little. Russia has been unable (and unwilling) to provide aid, energy, and food to North Korea (as China has been doing for decades now); Moscow’s cancelling of the debt was politically making virtue out of necessity since Moscow knew Pyongyang would never repay it; furthermore, the DPRK is a poor country, with unqualified labour and little infrastructure and as such economically offers little space for cooperation<sup>77</sup>. The prospects of fulfillment of all these projects is

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<sup>70</sup> *Россия и КНДР перешли на рубль в расчетах между странами*, RIA Novosti, 20.10.2014, <https://ria.ru/economy/20141020/1029182641.html> (access: 05.12.2016).

<sup>71</sup> E.g. SSE Rason, *Things Are Brewing In North Korea's Rason Zone*, „The Forbes” 2013, 20 XI.

<sup>72</sup> Andrei Lankov, *N Korea and Russia...*

<sup>73</sup> How Russia-North Korea relations have recently surprised observers <https://www.nknews.org/2016/01/how-russia-north-korea-relations-have-recently-surprised-observers/>, 29.01.2016

<sup>74</sup> *Стартовал Год дружбы России и КНДР*, RG 14.04.2015, <https://rg.ru/2015/04/14/kndr.html> (access: 05.12.2016).

<sup>75</sup> Doug Bandow, *Russia and North Korea Play Nice: Vladimir Putin's Ukrainian Dance With Kim Jong-un*, The Huffington Post, 24.03.2015, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/doug-bandow/russia-and-north-korea-pl\\_b\\_6934976.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/doug-bandow/russia-and-north-korea-pl_b_6934976.html) (access: 02.12.2016); for more nuanced, Russian perspective, see: С. С.Суслина, *Перспективы российско-южнокорейского экономического сотрудничества и новые вызовы мировой экономики*, [in]: *Россия и Корея в меняющемся мире...* p. 84-99.

<sup>76</sup> For more about Russia-DPRK Economic relations, see (in French): Nicolas Levi, *Elements de reflexion à la nature des relations entre la Corée du Nord et la Russie*, Academia.Edu,

[https://www.academia.edu/14730437/Analysis\\_of\\_the\\_cooperation\\_between\\_North\\_Korea\\_and\\_Russia](https://www.academia.edu/14730437/Analysis_of_the_cooperation_between_North_Korea_and_Russia) (access: 06.12.2016)

<sup>77</sup> Doug Bandow, *Russia and North Korea Play Nice...*

uncertain at best (“the survival rate of these projects will be remarkably low”)<sup>78</sup> and the numbers are merciless: “in the mid-1990s, North Korea's trade with China roughly equaled its trade with Russia, but today Sino-North Korean trade volumes hover around the \$6.5b mark, exceeding Russo-North Korean trade volumes by 60-fold”; even if the DPRK and Russia reach their declared goal of increasing trade volume to \$1bln by 2020 (the goal itself is unlikely to be met) that would be around of “one-sixth of the current Sino-North Korean trade volume”<sup>79</sup>. Furthermore, even in the global economy’s niches where Russia is strong (arms sales), North Korea is too poor to buy the most advanced equipment (Su-35), let alone maintain it. That is why, from an economic perspective “ironically, Moscow’s chief economic interest in the North is a transit route to South Korea (...) the Putin government is interested in north Korea, not North Korea”<sup>80</sup>. But Moscow squeezed by 2014 sanctions had no funds to finance these ambitious projects (a nearly bankrupted Pyongyang could not finance them from the very beginning).

Thus, from the very beginning, the main aim of Russia’s intensified cooperation was probably to divert Western attention away from Ukraine, and to irritate Washington: “Russia demonstrated that it could make Washington pay for confronting Moscow over Ukraine”<sup>81</sup>. Pyongyang accepted this out of necessity – “beggars can’t be choosers” – in the conditions of near-total isolation, Pyongyang chose to play this political game as it cost the DPRK little, or perhaps even offered some small benefits (canceling of the debt). Accordingly, this has made this new Russia-North Korean rapprochement an “international Kabuki Theater” or “twisted tango”<sup>82</sup>. Whatever we call it, however, the intensified relations with the DPRK did not bring a significant improvement in Russia’s position on the Korean Peninsula.

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<sup>78</sup> *How Russia-North Korea relations have recently surprised observers*, NK News, 29. 01.2016, <https://www.nknews.org/2016/01/how-russia-north-korea-relations-have-recently-surprised-observers/> (access: 05.12.2016)

<sup>79</sup> Andrei Lankov, *N Korea and Russia...*

<sup>80</sup> Doug Bandow, *Russia and North Korea Play Nice*

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid*; *Idem, Friends with Benefits: Russia and North Korea's Twisted Tango* <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/friends-benefits-russia-north-koreas-twisted-tango-12369> (access: 05.12.2016).

## Conclusion

Since the fall of the USSR, Russia has been trying to improve its position in the Korean Peninsula in order to boost its international profile. Initially, these attempts ended up in almost total failure in the 1990s, when Yeltsin's clumsy foreign policy led to a lowering, not improving, of Russia's position on the Korean Peninsula. Things started a bit better with Putin's "personal diplomacy" vis a vis Pyongyang. Moscow was able to balance its position in the Peninsula and achieve good relations with both Koreas. Most importantly, the Kremlin was invited to Six-Party Talks and hoped to have a permanent say in regional policy making. Being part of the Six-Party Talks remains Moscow's biggest success in the Peninsula after 1991.

Unfortunately, these beneficial circumstances did not last long, as due to Pyongyang's nuclear ambitions the Six-Party Talks failed. Since then Russia has been a rather non-active international player on the Peninsula, that has usually ben band-wagoned to Chinese actions. Moscow has tried to intensify its relations with Seoul and to attract South Korean investment in the Russian Far East. This all, however, has turned out to be mere wishful thinking and will remain so as long as Russia's idea of greater engagement in the Peninsula will be built on hopes for grand infrastructure and energy projects (the Trans-Korean pipeline and railway) that require a serious improvement in the Korean political situation. Judging from the recent situation, there are no bright perspectives for such a scenario, though naturally the situation is dynamic and things might turn upside down again any time. As long as the situation does not change radically, however, Russia's options for improving its position there are limited. Despite the apparent ups and downs, Russia's position since 1991 has been quite constant – that of a secondary great power in Korea.

This leaves the Korean Peninsula with one important asset for Russia. Korea is not important per se, but as a reserve playground, a place to bargain political deals in return for favours elsewhere. This attitude was particularly visible in the Russian-North Korean rapprochement, which has been active since 2014. Russia wanted to divert attention away from Ukraine and to send a political signal to the West, particularly the US, that it could interfere in Korean affairs in the same way the US is perceived in the Kremlin to interfered in Ukraine, Russia's "near abroad". In this way, the Korean Peninsula serves Russia as a complementary area that supports

the general line of Russian policy makers: to regain global superpower status.