

A Subtle Difference between Russia and China's Stances toward the Korean Peninsula and Its Strategic Implications for South Korea*

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In a "New Cold War," Northeast Asia becomes a battlefield among great powers. China no longer seems to accept any further erosion of its strategic advantages, particularly the deployment of THAAD in South Korea. Thus South Korea is finding no recourse for ameliorating the North Korean nuclear problem within a "great game" between the US and China. But there is a difference between Russia and China's strategic position. Russia is relatively detached from the security dilemma unfolding in Northeast Asia. While Beijing perceives the THAAD as a fundamental threat, Moscow's strategic sensitivity is lower. Moreover, Russia is able to keep North Korea at a greater distance than China, which faces difficulty in neglecting its buffer state. Additionally, Moscow's growing economic influence in North Korea recently assists in maximizing its strategic goals. Indeed Russia could conceivably reap big rewards by supplanting China and adopting a new role as regional balancer. Thus South Korea is able to secure its strategic autonomy by using Russia as a bulwark against the current geopolitical dilemma.

Keywords: *Korea-Russia Relations, Korea-China Relations, Sino-Russian Relations, New Cold War, Northeast Asia, THAAD in South Korea*

1. INTRODUCTION

Recent events indicate that we are entering a critical turning point in world affairs. Conflict between the West, especially the United States (US), and its principal great power adversaries, China and Russia, has begun rippling out further into Eurasia, the Middle East, and even Northeast Asia. In the Eurasian region, tensions between the West and the Russian Federation have mounted following the latter's annexation of the Crimean Peninsula in 2014, resulting in a veritable arm's race between the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and Russia. Given various external factors, such as "Brexit," how the course of this regional conflict will unfold cannot be easily predicted. Nevertheless, tensions between the West and Moscow have continued to escalate. Immediately after the United Kingdom's (UK) decision to withdrawal from the European Union (EU), NATO elected to send an additional 5,000 troops to Russia's bordering countries such as Poland. Conflict between Russia and the West is also intensifying in the Middle East, especially in Syria where a proxy war between the two sides has developed. Moreover, in a recent NATO summit the US and several of its Western allies agreed to delay the withdrawal of forces from Afghanistan, citing the recent surge in Taliban activity.

Conflict between the two sides has also escalated to a more serious level in the Northeast

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Asian region. China and Russia are strongly opposed to the US and South Korea's decision to deploy the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system on the Korean Peninsula. Both China and Russia regard THAAD as an extension of the US Missile Defense (MD) system, which they perceive as targeting them as well as North Korea (Kir'anov, 2014). Accordingly, an atmosphere of rising tensions, referred to as a "New Cold War," is pervading the world stage, pitting South Korea, the US, and Japan on one side against North Korea, China, and Russia on the other (Yoon, 2016). This "New Cold War" mood was initially sparked by former US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's declaration of a "pivot to Asia" in her 2011 *Foreign Policy* column (Clinton, 2011). Almost simultaneously, friction over the South China Sea dispute began to emerge between the US and People's Republic of China (PRC). Russian President Vladimir Putin similarly started to accord greater attention to this region, declaring Russia's "New Eastern" policy in the beginning of his third term in 2013 (Hill and Lo, 2013). Although it cannot be regarded as a direct cause of the "New Cold War" atmosphere, the acceleration of North Korean nuclear and missile capabilities is the most patent example of an emerging security crisis both globally and in Northeast Asia particularly.

Given its recent decision to deploy the THAAD within its borders, South Korea seems poised to become an important battlefield in the "New Cold War." Seoul has already encountered serious difficulties in balancing between the US and China, which includes having to stave off various forms of counterattack emanating from China. Does the Republic of Korea (ROK) have no choice but to lose its strategic autonomy and become increasingly subordinate to its alliance with the US? Moreover, does this suggest that, in the context of a "New Cold War," South Korea would no longer retain leverage against North Korean nuclear weapons and missiles for itself?

To find an answer to this series of questions, this study examines Russia's strategic interests and analyzes its current strategic posture toward the Korean Peninsula. While both Moscow and Beijing belong to same axis of the "New Cold War," it has become apparent that Russia's position is subtly different from that of China. Accordingly, this article also reassesses the diplomatic implications of Russia's current strategic posture for ROK in the recently altered geopolitical environment in Northeast Asia. In other words, this paper elucidates the subtle difference between China and Russia's strategic stance toward the Korean Peninsula, particularly within the context of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea's (DPRK) repeated nuclear provocations, the announcement of THAAD deployment in South Korea, and the inauguration of President Donald Trump in the US. As a result of this central difference in foreign policy, this study maintains that South Korea is able to partly secure its strategic autonomy by using Russia as a bulwark against the current geopolitical dilemma emerging in Northeast Asia.

The second section of this paper describes China's strategic interests in Northeast Asia and its relations with North and South Korea. Similarly, the third section explains Russia's traditional interests in the region and its relations with the Korean Peninsula in particular. The fourth section demonstrates that a strategic divergence between China and Russia's policies toward the Korean Peninsula is currently underway. The fifth and final section outlines several policy implications for South Korea based on the analysis. This concluding section recommends several viable courses of action that South Korea can take in the context of an emerging strategic divergence between the two continental powers, China and Russia, and a generally unstable geopolitical environment in Northeast Asia.

2. CHINA'S INTERESTS IN NORTHEAST ASIA AND ITS RELATIONS WITH KOREAN PENINSULA

2.1. China's Long-term Interests and Its Recent Changes

Since its reform and opening up in the 1980s, China's principal task has been to ensure continued economic growth. And, to achieve this goal, China has sought to maintain stability at home and abroad. Although the close of the Cold War and the *Tiananmen* Square Protests created a more hostile international environment, the PRC has therefore articulated a grand strategy of establishing peaceful relations with foreign countries in order to sustain the high rate of economic growth and build a rich and powerful country. This grand strategy is best epitomized by two slogans: "Peaceful Rise" (*Heping Jueqi*), a motto China once staunchly advocated, and "Peaceful Development" (*Heping Fazhan*), which the PRC now emphasizes instead (Zheng, 2005; Information Office of the State Council, 2011). Of course, the hegemonic power, the US, is among the countries with whom China desires to forge more peaceful relations.

Consequently, China has accepted many US initiatives in Northeast Asia, such as the US-centered alliance system and the presence of US force in South Korea and Japan. In fact, given that the US could prevent Japan's ascension as a military power and its contribution to stability on the Korean Peninsula, the US presence in Northeast Asia has proved rather advantageous for China's peaceful development. China has sometimes evinced concern about the US encroachment on its sovereignty, particularly regarding the Taiwan issue. Nevertheless, China has tolerated rather than challenged American hegemony for providing the safety and stability required for achieving modernization and economic growth (Shambaugh, 2003; Yahuda, 2006: 166-168). Within this context, the PRC also established diplomatic ties with the ROK in 1992, since the latter was considered a valuable commercial trading partner given the size of its economy. Significantly, this suggested that the South Korea-China relationship can not only be a dependent variable in the conflict among the Cold War powers but also as a novel independent variable (Chung, 2005: 200-213).

However, in addition to benefitting from the stability provided by the US, Beijing was bound to compete with Washington for regional hegemony. As a result, China necessarily retained strong interests in the survival of its critical buffer state, North Korea, as much as its peaceful economic growth. Therefore, the PRC could never assent to hurried regime change in the DPRK, even though it was also unwilling to accept the threat to the safety and stability of its borders that North Korea's nuclear development poses (Ji, 2001: 387-398; Shambaugh, 2003). China's core strategy toward the Korean Peninsula, as will be discussed below, was maintaining the status quo to prevent the instability of the Northeast Asian region from intensifying. Therefore, Beijing played a leading role in solving the North Korean nuclear problem via the multilateral cooperation body that the US also participated in, the "Six-Party Talks," for quite a long time.

Yet, China's long-term strategy for economic growth based on securing stability at home and abroad entered a new phase following the 2007/8 world financial crisis triggered by the US. Since then, there has been a growing perception that China will attempt to augment its national power and reduce US influence in Northeast Asia, if not aspire to global hegemony; moreover, there is rising recognition that China is responding to the obvious decline in the US's relative strength by ramping up its foreign policy assertiveness (Mearsheimer, 2010:

3-4; Swain, 2010; Schweller and Pu, 2011).

Through its “pivot to Asia” politics, the US seems to demonstrate all the textbook *realpolitik* reactions that established powers are anticipated to adopt toward rising powers. These include, *inter alia*, the quintessential strategies of “balancing,” “containment,” and “deterrence” (Paul, 2016: 10-13). For instance, the US is attempting to strategically balance against China by reworking its numerous bilateral alliances in Northeast Asia into an overall networked one. In particular, the US’s networked MD system is being promoted in line with its networked alliance. The US made no efforts to hide its intentions to contain the PRC, encouraging its naval forces to mount an active military response to China’s assertive actions via the advancement of military cooperation with India and other South Asian countries in the South China Sea.

China has emphasized that the essential lines of its foreign policy for the peaceful economic development remained unchanged, denying its increasing assertiveness. Many specialists also insist that claims of China’s recent assertiveness have been exaggerated or even falsified (Dai, 2010). Nonetheless, the recently held 19th Party Congress demonstrated a clear shift in Beijing’s long-term strategy, although the Xi Jinping regime did not seem to disclose the entirety of its plan. The PRC’s official declaration of a “New Era” in the 19th Party Congress means that China will recognize its heightened international status, exhibit greater confidence in international affairs, and more diligently pursue its national interest and grand strategy moving forward. In particular, President Xi delineated what he considers to be the current weaknesses of Western societies, such as the emergent clash of civilizations in Europe, the nullification of the Climate Change Convention, and return to trade protectionism exemplified by the US President Trump’s “America First” strategy. President Xi proclaimed that China’s socialist system of governance can provide a viable alternative to the Western system that bypasses these various weaknesses. China, it seems, is rethinking its previous defensive stance toward global powers, especially the US, and is instead even proposing an alternative global order.

Nevertheless, China has not sought conflict with the US. Beijing continues to bargain with Washington, thoroughly calculating its long-term interests at every step. Washington, too, adheres to this strategic posture (He, 2016: 206-219). China attempts to avoid serious confrontations with the US as far as possible, although it is less yielding to the US demands than it has been historically. And, more importantly, China’s strategic positions against South Korea will be an extension of its similar policies toward the US.

2.2. China’s Changing Strategic Relations with the Korea Peninsula and Koreas’ Vulnerability

Currently, the PRC has neither ambitions to initiate conflict with the US nor a scheme that seeks to dissolve the US-ROK alliance. Beijing is also acutely aware that a stable security environment in Northeast Asia depends on the leading role played by the US, and that the dissolution of the US-centered alliance system would prompt the rearmament of several Asia-Pacific countries (Zhao, 2017: 502). China’s recent assertiveness therefore cannot be considered an offensive strategy to replace American hegemony in the region, but rather as a reaction to the *realpolitik* behaviors of the US (Christensen, 2012: 22-37). Nonetheless, from these strategic interactions several changes to the bilateral relationship between these two major powers are emerging, at least in the Northeast Asian region if not at the global level. While it may be unable to categorically deny the US supremacy, China’s reaction against the

deployment of THAAD in South Korea plainly demonstrates its refusal to accept any further erosion of its strategic advantages in Northeast Asia.

Beijing is not acting out of concern for South Korea's strategic position or ROK-PRC relations, but completely on the basis of its perceptions of the US. In other words, South Korea and its relations with China is no longer strictly an independent variable but also has become a dependent variable influenced by the ties between the US and the PRC again, which in turn suggests that there were fundamental changes for the ROK-PRC relations in the post-Cold War era. China's growing international status and the alteration of its long-term strategies are bound to exert significant influence over South Korea. The deterioration of their relations, especially due to the deployment of THAAD, lucidly demonstrated the PRC's resolve and the widening asymmetric interdependence between the two countries. According to one study, the ROK suffered considerable losses due to the PRC sanctions, amounting to 0.5% of GDP, while the PRC's loss was comparatively negligible, totaling only 0.01% of GDP (Han and Chen, 2017). Although China continues to oppress South Korea, leveraging its heightened international status, Seoul was unsuccessful in finding an effective measure to cope with Beijing's "attacks."

A similar logic is applicable to the relationship between North Korea and China. The DPRK, as a socialist ally, could potentially enjoy a considerable premium in its diplomatic ties with the PRC, although not all the previous relations between the two necessarily coincide with the term "blood ally" that had been applied to their relationship; one example of such tension was the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and South Korea in 1992, a move which North Korea strongly opposed (Ji, 2001: 387-389). Considering that Kim Jung-il held summits with President Hu Jintao three times in his four visits to China during the 2010 to 2011 period immediately preceding his death, North Korea enjoyed this premium until relatively recently. Indeed, China intentionally reserved special treatment for North Korea, since as the suzerain state of socialist countries the former could strengthen its international position and use the latter as an effective tool in its foreign policy in the Korean Peninsula and even against the alliance between South Korea and the US.

However, China has ceased its previous attempts to mend its relationship with North Korea. China's newfound reticence follows the intensification of North Korea's nuclear and missile programs, which threaten several key Chinese strategic goals, such as maintaining peaceful relations with the US. Thus, China is participating in United Nations' (UN) sanctions against North Korea led by the US. Beijing seems willing to sacrifice the China-North Korea relationship to some degree, to prevent a "secondary boycott" from the US and the attendant strain on its ties with Washington that steady cooperation with North Korea would entail. Furthermore, President Xi Jinping, who enjoys greater power than his predecessor, Hu Jintao, appears unwilling to accept North Korea's notorious young leader, Kim Jung-un, on equal grounds in the future summit meetings they will hold.

In this respect, a remarkable point worth noting is that the deteriorating relations between South Korea and China also no longer automatically lead to the improvement of relations between North Korea and China. Beijing, in other words, did not require a commensurate improvement of its relationship with Pyongyang to compensate for the erosion of its ties with Seoul. At least until recently, the PRC has considered its posture toward the US as its preeminent strategic preoccupation, and therefore Seoul held no meaningful bargaining chip over China regarding the North Korean nuclear issue. Accordingly, the stagnant relationship between the PRC and DPRK may no longer send a positive signal to the ROK. More importantly, as explained below, if relations between China and the US continue to be

strained due to Northeast Asian affairs, China's appreciation level of the strategic value that North Korea provides as a critical buffer state is liable to increase. For this reason, Beijing can never assent to either regime change in North Korea or a preemptive strike initiated by the US. Therefore, irrespective of China's imperative to ensure North Korean political continuity, South Korea can no longer easily utilize China as an effective leverage over North Korea.

Although the "New Cold War" has not yet materialized, both the US and PRC are adjusting their foreign policy stances in the Northeast Asian region in anticipation of a "great game" among the great powers. Consequently, the bargaining powers that the ROK enjoyed as an independent actor is diminishing. Choosing to take sides between the US and China is an impossible task for South Korea, since it relies on the US-ROK alliance for national security purposes and owes a substantial portion of its post-Cold War economic success to its vast exchanges with the PRC (Chung, 2007: 112-121). This difficult situation can only exacerbate South Korea's ability to resolve the North Korean nuclear problem.

3. RUSSIA'S INTERESTS IN NORTHEAST ASIA AND ITS RELATIONS WITH KOREAN PENINSULA

3.1. Russia's Long-term Interests in Northeast Asia

Since the end of Cold War and the dissolution of Soviet Union, Russia has maintained its own strategic interests in Northeast Asia. From the Boris Yeltsin era to the contemporary period of Putin's leadership, successive post-Soviet governments have maintained a consistent level of interest in the safety and stability of Russia's borders connected to the Northeast Asian region, especially those related to military security. Ever since the pre-Soviet era, in fact, Russia has been geopolitically vulnerable to military threats emanating from its numerous border areas that span across the Eurasian continent, and therefore, perhaps more than any other country in the world, had little choice but to prioritize ensuring the safety and stability of its vast territory. For this reason, Russia pays considerable attention to its borders connected to the Northeast Asian region as well as to its European neighbors.

In this respect, the security of Russia's eastern territories depends critically on defusing the "powder keg" situation that inter-Korean tensions pose to Northeast Asia. Russia's unwavering opposition toward North Korean nuclear provocations is undoubtedly informed by this precarious situation. North Korean nuclear weapons will inevitably generate some tensions in Northeast Asia. A domino effect among Northeast Asian countries, whereby each undergoes a period of nuclear armament, could potentially be triggered by the DPRK's repeated tests. This would certainly undermine Russia's long-term interests in the safety and stability of its border regions. Therefore, in practice the post-Soviet Russian governments have consistently and without fail denounced North Korean nuclear provocations and have actively taken part in the series of resolutions in which the UN has sanctioned the "rogue state."

Similarly, Russia is opposed to the deployment of THAAD in South Korea, and regards the defense system as a potential security threat to Northeast Asia and to itself (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2017). Considering that only the maintenance of permanent peace in Northeast Asia is able to guarantee the safety and stability of Russia's eastern border regions, the atmosphere of a "New Cold War" or increased tension between the

US and China is an extremely unfavorable geopolitical environment from the perspective of Russia's long-term security interests. Therefore, Russia has repeatedly expressed opposition to any military operations in the region, at least in principle, including North Korean nuclear tests and the deployment of THAAD in South Korea.

More importantly, in addition to its long-term security interests in Northeast Asia, Russia has recently articulated a vital interest in the future development of its Far Eastern and Siberian territories (Jeh and Kang, 2013). The Putin government has long focused on these internal territories as a new engine of Russia's economic growth, in line with its appropriately titled "New Eastern" policy. This policy area was forged as a consequence of worsening relations between Russia and the West since the late 2000s, and particularly as a response to the "Ukrainian Crisis" and corresponding Western sanctions that have negatively impacted the Russian national economy. Accordingly, the Putin government has willingly attempted to recover the loss from its worsening relations with the West in Eastern Europe, particularly via new benefits derived from its cooperation with wealthy Northeast Asian countries. That is, Russia has faced ever-growing pressure to develop its Far Eastern and Siberian territories by integrating them into one of the most dynamic economies in the world.

In particular, President Putin aspires to make Siberia and its Far Eastern regions a key node in the vast Eurasian network of energy resource trade and production (Butyanova, 2012). The Putin government anticipates that this plan will have positive spillover effects for economic development in Russia's other regions (Kuchma, 2014). Therefore, the economic investment and cooperation from the wealthy Asia-Pacific countries is of the utmost importance for Russia's eastern territories. At least at the present time, China appears open to cooperation with Russia on this issue. China, as is widely acknowledged, has consistently supported Russia to offset the economic hardships it is experiencing due to the Western sanctions. For instance, the two have already coordinated a "Strategic Energy Alliance" between themselves (Brown, 2015). While Japan cannot easily broaden the extent of its political or economic ties with Russia, the feasibility of such deepening relations depends critically on the progress of the longstanding Northern Territorial issue between the two countries and the stance that the US adopts toward such developments.

In contrast, South Korea is destined to face fundamental difficulties participating in Moscow's plans because North Korea, a "rogue state," is located in the middle of its road to Siberia and the Far Eastern parts of Russia. Unless tensions on the Korean Peninsula are dramatically relieved, South Korea cannot easily access these areas. Given Pyongyang's unexpected military provocations and Seoul's hostile reactions to them, South Korea and Russia's attempts at energy cooperation have been repeatedly suspended, since some necessary conditions, including the stable operation of new pipelines, cannot be guaranteed in long run.

The Russian Federation has made efforts to cooperate with both North and South Korea. Yet, neither bilateral economic cooperation between South Korea and Russia nor trilateral cooperation among North Korea, South Korea, and Russia have progressed satisfactorily. This disappointing performance results because the relationship between North and South Korea could realistically sour over any issue, thereby increasing uncertainty in an agreement. For instance, in autumn 2015 the Park Geun-hye government emphatically rejected any negotiation or cooperation with the Kim Jung-un regime in response to the DPRK's military provocations. Consequently, several projects aimed at large-scale trilateral economic cooperation, such as the Rajin-Hassan logistics project, were cut short after an already difficult start. Needless to say, Russia's longstanding proposal to develop the Trans-Korean

Railroad (TKR) and Trans-Siberian Railroad (TSR) is becoming a more distant possibility. Moreover, military escalation on the Korean Peninsula would undermine Japan's efforts to cooperate with Russia, thereby worsening Northeast Asia's regional security even further.

In short, the Russian Federation has held vital interests connected to Northeast Asia. Nonetheless, until recently, Russia was unsuccessful in attracting an adequate amount of economic cooperation and financial investment from the rich Asia-Pacific for the purposes of fulfilling its plans for its Siberian and Far Eastern territories; support from the Asia-Pacific has similarly been insufficient for enhancing Russia's contribution to fostering safety and stability of Northeast Asia. Despite its expansive size, Russia has played almost no leading role in satisfying the long-term goals of the Northeast Asian region. As will be discussed below, Russia's unexceptional performance in the region is not only a function of the unstable inter-Korean relationship, but also due to its marginalized position in the Korean Peninsula.

3.2. Russia's Strategic Relations with the Korean Peninsula

Considering the circumstances outlined above, the Russian Federation is bound to have a strong incentive to arbitrate disputes between North and South Korea while cooperating with the two sides individually. A relatively peaceful Korean Peninsula is non-negotiable issue for Russia, since a modicum of stability there is necessary to protecting Russia's economic interests and maintaining its border security. Of course, this is the reason why Russia has long been regarded as one of the foremost proponents of Korean unification among the interested actors in Northeast Asia (Vorontsov, 2013).

Nonetheless, Russia has taken almost no initiative in pursuing multilateral security arrangements together with the Northeast Asian countries or even in inducing their economic cooperation for the development of its Siberian and Far Eastern regions. Moscow's hesitations result almost entirely from its loss of influence over the Korean Peninsula, which has until recently kept silent when it came to regional security affairs. From the late Soviet Union era, when Mikhail Gorbachev reconfigured foreign policy around his 'New Thinking', to the early Yeltsin period, Russia was favorably disposed toward South Korea in security and economic matters. This approach not only caused Russia to lose most of its previous leverage over North Korea, but also quickly resulted in its relegation to junior actor in the security and economic issues surrounding Northeast Asia. One example is the humiliation that Russia suffered after being completely excluded from the resolution process during the First North Korean nuclear crisis in 1994.

Starting from the middle of the Yeltsin period, it is understandable that Russia altered its diplomatic position to keep an equal and measured distance from both North and South Korea (Yoon, 2007: 139-140). Since the beginning of 2000s till now, the Putin government has sought a more active role in the North Korean nuclear program resolution process. This was most clearly demonstrated in the opening of the "Six-Party Talks," which could satisfy Russia's strategic interests in Northeast Asia (Kim, 2012). Needless to say, Russia has firmly maintained that the imminent collapse of North Korea or erratic behavior on the part of the Kim regime due to external pressure on the regime will be detrimental to Northeast Asian regional security. Hence, Russia has expanded its repertoire of policy tools for dealing with North Korea's military provocations to include not only direct pressure, but also active participation in multilateral cooperation bodies—the "Six-Party Talks" in particular (Ha and Shin, 2007).

A remaining problem is the extent to which North Korea values Russia's economic and

security support. The Putin government knows well that maintaining a close relationship with North Korea will enable it to exert some influence over the pariah state, thereby at least incrementally increasing the influence Russia has on Northeast Asian economic and security issues. However, if the US and China sustain their comprehensive strategic cooperation to ensure regional stability, then Russia will continue to offer little strategic value for North Korea. In this case, the DPRK would be persuaded to rely more heavily on China than Russia for its national security. In addition, North Korea already receives a more significant amount of economic support—in the form of commodities such as crude oil and food—from China than it does from any other country, including Russia.

More importantly, the Russian Federation has been in fact of little relevance for South Korea as well. Given the strategic cooperation between the US and China, as well as Beijing's substantial influence over Pyongyang in the post-Cold War period, South Korea has virtually no incentive to rely on Russia in the process of solving the North Korean nuclear problem. Additionally, South Korea has benefited significantly more from economic exchange and cooperation with China than it has with Russia since the 2000s. This explains why South Korea, partly in line with Japan, has largely eschewed economic cooperation and financial investment for the development of Russia's Siberian and Far Eastern territories. As Russia's relationship with North Korea has become distant, it was also neglected by South Korea in terms of both economic and security cooperation.

Russian leverage over North Korea has gradually been reduced and is now markedly smaller than China's influence over the "hermit kingdom" in terms of both economic and security issues. Therefore, South Korea (and Japan) has also not recognized Russia's strategic value in the peace-building process on the Korean Peninsula. Consequently, Moscow has virtually no effective voice in any security issue in Northeast Asia, which has limited the incentive that South Korea (and Japan) has for actively participating in Russia's ambitious development plans for its Siberian and Far Eastern territories. However, as will be explained below, we must reassess Russia's strategic importance to the Northeast Asian region, especially in comparison to China, within the context of the DPRK's repeated nuclear provocations, the declaration of THAAD deployment in South Korea, and the inauguration of President Trump in the US.

4. A SUBTLE DIVERGENCE BETWEEN CHINA AND RUSSIA'S STRATEGIC POSITIONS TOWARD THE KOREAN PENINSULA

4.1. Recent Changes in Strategic Relations among Russia, China, and the Korean Peninsula

After the dissolution of Soviet Union and the beginning of post-Cold War era, Russia's influence over the Korean Peninsula waned due to its inability to foster deeper relations with either North or South Korea. This problem is aggravated by the regional presence of the US and China and the pervasive influence they exercise over North and South Korea. Above all, North Korea's dependence on China remains extremely high. Russia is still one of DPRK's much needed allied countries, albeit one that is less salient than China. Although Moscow has made efforts to develop its relationship with Pyongyang under the Putin government's "New Eastern" policy, especially after the deterioration of its relations with Western Europe, the country has been unable to exert the same massive influence over North Korea as China

has done. As noted previously, Seoul has little option but to rely on Beijing for exercising effective leverage over Pyongyang for de-escalating the North Korean nuclear problem. Lastly, the size and scope of economic exchange between South Korea and China has consistently increased since 2000s, and China is still South Korea's biggest trading partner.

However, the relationship between North Korea and China began to change considerably after the inaugurations of Kim Jung-un and Xi Jinping, respectively. To start, China's attitude toward North Korea became appreciably more assertive than before. For instance, China expressed its strong discontent with Pyongyang's nuclear tests. The repeated military provocations of the Kim Jung-un regime are worsening its precarious relations with the US. Indeed Xi admitted difficulty in enduring the unpredictability of the DPRK's new, young leader, particularly after the purge of pro-China leader Jang Song-taek in 2013. North Korea also began to develop distrust in China owing to the abrupt change in the "elder brother"'s behaviors. Above all, the Kim Jung-un regime seems to have developed a deep suspicion of Xi Jinping. At the same time, the DPRK's nuclear developments appear to be an anathema to the Chinese leader.

Thus, for the purpose of reducing its diplomatic isolation and its dependence on Beijing, the Kim Jung-un regime ironically developed an incentive to strengthen its positive relations with Moscow. For one, the relationship between Russia and North Korea stands to progress markedly due to the Putin government's decision to write off 90 percent of the DPRK's total debt—11 billion dollars—in May 2014. Around this time, Russia promoted a plan to export its oil and coal resources to the Asia-Pacific countries via the Rajin port, and the long-discussed project of connecting the TKR and TSR was reexamined. Russia also started to provide technical and financial support for the modernization of the North Korean railroad system and has continued to provide yearly quantities of energy and food (grain). Moreover, should this relationship advance further, there is potential to coordinate trilateral economic cooperation among North and South Korea and Russia, which was readily coupled with the Park Geun-hye government's "Eurasia Initiative" (Mundy, 2015; Zakharova, 2016). For example, Moscow and Pyongyang once agreed to repair DPRK's electric power grids to transmit electricity from Russia to North Korea and even to South Korea (Ahn, 2015; Kim, 2015).

This rising momentum of cooperation between Russia and the two Koreas has been consistently sustained for some time. In April 2015, the Intergovernmental Commission on Trade, Economic, Scientific, and Technical Cooperation between North Korea and Russia tackled several major issues of economic cooperation issues, including those related to energy, transportation, industry, agricultural matters, and the exploration of natural resources (Zakharova, 2016). Considering that the Minister for the Development of the Russian Far East, Alexander Galushka, visited Pyongyang in October 2015 for ensuring comprehensive economic cooperation and maintaining trilateral collaboration, we can conclude that the economic ties between Russia and the Korean Peninsula were relatively stable until that time, although the DPRK's fourth nuclear test in early 2016 would noticeably alter this beneficial situation. In short, the Russian Federation was able to satisfy its economic interests through the Korean Peninsula for the first time since the beginning of the post-Cold War era.

Despite its ratification of the UN Resolution series against North Korea's repeated military provocations, Moscow has left its strategic positions unchanged in order to sustain its cozy relationship with Pyongyang and to retain at least minimal influence over the DPRK. The Putin government manages to consistently stick to a policy of resolving local security issues and facilitating the momentum of economic cooperation with the DPRK through

diplomatic means rather than military operations even as it officially criticizes the Kim Jung-un regime for its belligerence. As a consequence of Russia's consistent efforts, coupled with the Kim Jung-un regime's strategy to overcome its over-dependence on China, Moscow could potentially offset some of the overwhelming influence that Beijing has over North Korea. Indeed, it was recently reported that Russia has increased the volume of energy it supplies to North Korea to more than 30% of the amount provided by China (Cho, 2017). Thus, the Russian Federation has used diverse means to steadily extend its control over North Korea. By extension, Russia's aggregate influence in the Korean Peninsula and the Northeast Asian region generally is waxing.

4.2. Divergence in Strategic Positions toward the Korean Peninsula between China and Russia

Since early 2016, when the DPRK launched its fourth nuclear experiment and tested ballistic missiles, the security environment in Northeast Asia has been sharply altered, and accordingly relations among China, Russia, and the Korean Peninsula were likely to undergo dramatic changes. North Korea's nuclear program is certainly the cause of this heightened tension in the regional security environment in Northeast Asia. Both the Xi and Putin governments have responded not only by outwardly expressing strong dissatisfaction with Kim Jung-un's regime. They also cooperated with the UN Security Council's Resolution No. 2270, an effort that was spearheaded by the US and incorporated into its provisions the strongest sanctions against North Korea to date.

Nonetheless, the Putin government still appeared to cultivate its relationship with Pyongyang to a certain extent. For one, the adoption of the aforementioned UN Resolution was briefly postponed due to Russia's attempts to reconfigure the resolution in the DPRK's favor, even during the ratification stage of the process. In February 2016, Galushka went so far as to declare that Russia could maintain economic ties with North Korea as long as Pyongyang would not flagrantly encroach on the UN Resolution, and in March of the same year the Director of the United Front Department in the North Korean Labor Party, Kim Young-chul, secretly visited Moscow to request support (Moon, 2016).

Furthermore, the joint decision by Seoul and Washington to deploy the THAAD in South Korea presents an opportunity for Pyongyang and Moscow to strengthen their bilateral relationship. Another possibility is the emergence of a quasi-alliance among North Korea, Russia, and China. Currently, the DPRK seems to be revamping its international military provocations to drive deeper the wedge between China and Russia on the one hand and the US on the other. As mentioned above, these more pronounced cleavages in Northeast Asia can be regarded as part of the development of a "New Cold War." In this situation, Moscow officially sides with Beijing in opposing the deployment of THAAD.¹

However, there is a difference between Russia and China's strategic position towards both the North Korean nuclear problem and THAAD. Russia is relatively more detached from the security dilemma unfolding in Northeast Asia. While Beijing perceives the deployment of THAAD as a fundamental threat to its national security, Moscow's strategic sensitivity to the defense system is unambiguously lower. Russia therefore has the opportunity to at

¹ As noted above, the Xi regime has currently laid the blame partly on the Kim Jung-un regime's repeated military provocations for the deployment of THAAD, which also contributes to the recent rapid improvement of the Russia-North Korea relationship.

least partially deflect responsibility for the threat posed by the US and the deployment of THAAD to China. It is actually efficient for Russia to steer the missile path westward if it decides to attack the US, since its territory spans over the entire, vast Eurasian Continent. Russia instead regards attacks from the NATO alliance system in Europe as a more pressing threat to its national security than similar military operations in Northeast Asia. Most Chinese experts also think that THAAD's radar capacities can be used to neutralize China's missile system, but its MD system is effectively useless against both North Korea and Russia (Taylor, 2016; Lukin, 2017: 7-8). In a July 2017 interview with a Russian media, President Xi once again voiced vehement opposition to the deployment of THAAD, and stated that Beijing and Moscow will react to it either together or individually. However, the specific actions that the Putin government has taken against the ROK in response to THAAD are still unknown (Shepherd, 2017).

Similarly, Moscow adheres to a slightly different strategic perspective regarding the DPRK and the implications that its actions have for Russian national security. Although the DPRK is situated in a key strategic location for Russia as well, the "rogue state" is certainly not as critical as a buffer state for Russia as it is for China. At the same time, the North Korea nuclear dilemma presents Russia with one of its most threatening problems, especially those concerning its nearby border areas. In a sense, then, Russia faces a greater net loss than China from the Kim Jung-un regime's repeated nuclear tests. We can therefore conclude that Moscow's incentives to interrupt the Kim Jung-un regime's military bellicosity, even through diplomatic means, are as pronounced as Beijing's.

China, when viewed from the perspective of an unfolding "great power game" or the emergence of a "New Cold War," appears to be encountering a fundamental dilemma in the form of North Korea. On the one hand, Beijing will necessarily be alienated from Pyongyang should it attempt to reign in the rogue actor to ease the US's MD development in Northeast Asia. On the other hand, China will invariably forfeit its previously held position as a balancer in Northeast Asia respected by both the US and South Korea should the PRC tolerate the DPRK's armed protests and treat it as an irreplaceable buffer state.

Hence Beijing and Moscow's strategic interests are diverging as they pertain to Pyongyang, a development that is ironic considering growing perceptions that a "New Cold War" is evolving with China and Russia on one side. Russia is able to keep North Korea at a greater distance than China, which faces more difficulty in unilaterally reprimanding or neglecting its critical buffer state. In addition to this geopolitical advantage, Moscow's growing influence in North Korea assists in maximizing its strategic goals in Northeast Asia. Russia could conceivably reap unusually big rewards by supplanting China and adopting a new role as regional balancer, a first in the region since the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

Trump's election to the US presidency in November 2016 is likely to reinforce this geopolitical situation. The Trump government's foreign policy appears to evince a palpable hostility toward China, especially when compared with Russia. In particular, the new US government is likely to put strong trade, economic, and military pressure on China. Rather than China, the new US president is demonstrating greater willingness to partner with Russia for solving various regional challenges within the Northeast Asia region. This trend gathered strength as President Trump appointed pro-Russian figures to top foreign policy positions. For example, Rex Tillerson, who has substantial business experience in the Russian Federation, was appointed Secretary of State. Furthermore, the Kremlin is even suspected of interfering in the 2016 US presidential election to secure Trump's victory. Michael Flynn, who is well known for being pro-Russia, had been once selected as the National Security Advisor before

his eventual resignation due to charges of improper relations with Russia. Thus, at least so far, Moscow will be presented with greater opportunities to achieve the status of balancer in Northeast Asia, although the shifting relationship between the US and the Russian Federation may not relieve the growing tensions the two great powers face in Europe and the Middle East.

ROK-China relations have also recently undergone more pronounced changes. The relationship between the two countries reached its highest point when President Park joined Presidents Putin and Xi to observe the military parade held at the *Tiananmen Gate* to celebrate the 70th anniversary of the end of World War II. However, following the deployment of THAAD in South Korea in July 2016, relations between the ROK and PRC plummeted to their lowest point since the nations formed diplomatic ties. One reason for this occurrence is that the Park government miscalculated the extent to which improving relations with Beijing could persuade China to deter the advancement of North Korea's nuclear and missile programs.

In addition to this miscalculation, the Park government misjudged its bargaining power with China pertaining to the issue of the deepening alliance ties between the ROK and US. China has been negligent towards its ties with South Korea, aggravating them almost carelessly. Seoul therefore realized that it possesses few viable means for counteracting the continuous stream of economic sanctions against it coming from China. Indeed, the PRC is unlikely to restore its previously hospitable relations with South Korea as long as the US-ROK alliance is fortified. At the same time, Beijing has never abandoned its traditional strategic position of guaranteeing the survival of the Kim Jung-un regime, even if it nonetheless strengthened sanctions on North Korea for the purposes of ensuring stable US-China relations. In any case, South Korea seemed to find no recourse for ameliorating the North Korean nuclear problem within the broader context of a "great game" between the US and China.

South Korea's new Moon Jae-in government, which came to power following the impeachment of President Park, attempted to rectify some of the previous government's mistakes regarding the relationship between the two Koreas, although so far these problems have evaded simple solutions. In October 2017, the relationship between the ROK and PRC was finally restored. But in the process, the latter articulated a series of "three no's" (or three assurances) against the former. China expressed serious concerns about the establishment of the MD system, the additional deployment of THAAD, and the ongoing military cooperation among South Korea, Japan, and the US. In explaining the "three no's," the ROK used vague terminology, stating that "the PRC clarified again the stance which it had declared publicly" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2017; Panda, 2017).² At the moment, it is not clear whether South Korea will unconditionally accept the "three no's" put forward by China in the future as well. However, it is readily apparent that China refuses to tolerate the tightening alliance relationship between South Korea and the US as well as the development of North Korean nuclear weapons and missiles. If South Korea violates the suggestions reflected in the "three no's," then China will likely retaliate by taking revenge against the deployment of THAAD. Therefore, unless it gains new sources of leverage, Seoul has few options for manipulating its relations with China in its favor and thus faces difficulties in finding new measures to counteract Beijing.

² Interestingly, both the ministries of foreign affairs of two countries did not publicly provide the written agreement in English.

Interestingly, due to the deployment of THAAD and North Korea's military provocations, Russia also has the potential to balance South Korea's diplomatic relations with China and North Korea. Unlike Beijing, Moscow can use its unique geopolitical advantages to provide a unique diplomatic breakthrough for Seoul while also enhancing their cooperation on economic issues. Since Russia has traditionally held less influence over the Korean Peninsula and in Northeast Asia than China, Seoul has not expected Moscow to contribute to solving any of its regional post-Cold War security issues, such as North Korea's growing nuclear arsenal. Yet, after the THAAD deployment, a spiraling rivalry between the US and China, and the inauguration of US President Trump, the Russian Federation was posed with an unusual opportunity to play the role as a new balancer in Northeast Asia.

5. SUMMARY AND PROSPECT

Given the conditions outlined above, we can confidently conclude that Russia is growing in its strategic importance for South Korea. Confronted with the specter of North Korean nuclear weapons, Seoul can more readily pitch the necessity of THAAD deployment to Moscow than to Beijing. Of course, as explained earlier, there exists a non-trivial possibility that Russia also opposes.

South Korea's strategic machinations, including the THAAD, is based on the grounds of its long-term security objectives. However, Russian opposition to the THAAD could also result from more short-term strategic calculations, most notably its attempts to augment its position in Northeast Asia and to offset its strategic losses in Eurasia by gaining an advantage in another theater of operation. As previously mentioned, this is because the THAAD poses a less-than-fatal threat to Russia. South Korea therefore stands to increase Russia's geopolitical advantage in Northeast Asia and maximize its short-term strategic interests, a goal that is partly satisfied by the deployment of THAAD and the rising tensions between the US and China, should Seoul appreciate the potential strategic benefits that would come with compromising with Russia.

From a long-term, systemic perspective, the Korean Peninsula will continue to play a role as a significant battlefield in the "great game" between China and the US, as each adjusts their foreign policy behavior in the region to manage their global rise and decline, respectively. The two great powers have behaved accordingly during the THAAD deployment process. Within this geopolitical environment, South Korea will inevitably lose some of its strategic autonomy and bargaining power as it is forced to choose among the two great powers. South Korea therefore faces the intractable problem of having to accurately predict the outcome of the hegemonic competition between two regional powers. The Russian Federation, however, is instead adopting a new role in the Northeast Asian system, becoming a new balancer that can coerce and cajole North Korea in different circumstances. Russia is thus performing a role that China can no longer actively pursue, at least for the purpose of resolving the North Korea problem and ensuring peace on the Korean Peninsula. South Korea, then, must rely on Russia to recover its tattered relations with North Korea and China following the DPRK's military provocations and the deployment of THAAD.

As is well known, the Northeast Asian international relations and the corresponding security conditions seem to have rapidly changed in recent times, as the South and North Korea in April 27, 2018 and the US-DPRK in June 12, 2018 summits have been held consecutively. In particular, even the exchange between the guarantee from the international

community, especially including the US, for security of the Kim Jun-un regime and the complete denuclearization of North Korea is being seriously discussed between the Trump administration and Kim government, albeit the timeline and specific method could not easily be agreed upon by the two sides. And, other relevant countries such as China, Russia and Japan in Northeast Asia are being also involved in this process. Thus some important implications of this paper can be also applicable to this altered environment of the Northeast Asian region. It is because, as explained above, China still has a strong interest in North Korean denuclearization but has a deep concern as well on the emergence of a new DPRK or a unified Korean Peninsula that will demonstrate its solid pro-US stance, around some critical issues such as the withdrawal of the US troops from South Korea. Therefore China may continue to remain a very difficult partner on this long process for the peaceful Korean Peninsula and stable Northeast Asia, even though the Moon Jae-in government has done its best to make sure that South Korea takes the initiative to sustain this miraculous momentum of the “spring of Northeast Asia.”

In contrast, as discussed above, Russia’s strategic stance will be a little different from China’s. As is becoming increasingly apparent, the Putin government still requires South Korea’s cooperation for the development of its Eastern and Siberian territories, a goal that will be unattainable without a partial settlement to the North Korean nuclear crisis. It is therefore time for Seoul to broaden its cooperation with Moscow beyond what it had achieved before. In particular, the recently inducted Moon government can forge this stronger relationship and the strong trilateral relations that were needlessly frayed by Park’s outgoing government. Fortunately, the Presidential Committee on Northern Economic Cooperation was also recently launched primarily to strengthen cooperation with the Russian Federation. Through this new governmental body, South Korea needs to invest in the economic development of Russia’s Far Eastern and Siberian territories more than ever before. At the same time, South Korea must accord Russia greater latitude and influence for contributing to resolve security issues on the Korean Peninsula.

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