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[Can Russia Deter North Korea?](#)



Russia has long been part of the six-party-talks on the nuclear weapons program of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK). However, after decades of diplomatic impasse, Russia has been caught off guard. US Vice President Mike Pence has warned that the time of strategic patience "is over". President Donald Trump has sent "an armada" to the Korean Peninsula, calling on China to help curb Pyongyang's nuclear ambitions. Both China and the US now hold the initiative in this regard, and have invited North Korea for talks, encouraged by diplomats in South Korea and Japan. Does the Kremlin have a hand to play at this table?

A Pretense of Indifference

Russia kept up a veneer of indifference during the recent flare-up surrounding North Korea this April. This indifference is often explained by Moscow's [inability to influence](#) the situation in any way. This view is well-grounded. To begin with, Pyongyang only understands the language of strength. The United States has shown

that it is prepared to deploy troops to resolve the North Korean nuclear problem. In fact, it has played the role of the “very bad cop,” while leaning on China to play the good, but stern cop. As a result, Beijing has exerted economic pressure on the regime of Kim Jong Un.

China is well placed to do so. [84% of North Korea’s foreign trade](#) is conducted with China. Exports to China are worth \$2.34bn while imports from China are \$2.95bn. China is also the [main trade partner of illegal North Korean traders](#).

At the same time, Russia is poorly placed to wield any economic pressure on North Korea. Russia’s North Korean exports were valued at just [\\$8.8m](#) while imports were [\\$68m](#) in 2016. In other words, Moscow has barely any economic leverage over its neighbour compared to China.

Secondly, Russia’s policy in the Pacific is aimed at maneuvering between China, Japan, and South Korea. Consequently, it cannot clearly define its stance as regards the North Korean problem, as this would only complicate an [already tricky balancing act](#).

The ideal situation for the Kremlin would be never-ending diplomatic efforts in relations with the DPRK. This approach is well-grounded - none of the participants of the process are committed to changing the status quo as illustrated during the last time tensions flared on the Korean Peninsula.

Still, the situation of the regime in Pyongyang is not static. Economic and social changes are underway in North Korea, and will inevitably affect the domestic political situation at some point. Moreover, nuclear and missile programs are also being developed which have undermined diplomatic efforts throughout the last decade: a medium term, if not final solution to the problem can’t come soon enough. Perhaps something along the lines of the Iranian nuclear deal can help provide a way out.

Moscow is already looking for political assets to be employed in the case of unfavorable developments in this regard — a preparation for when it ceases to be viable to simply soft-pedal the North Korea issue.

Diplomatic Assets

Above all, diplomacy is the Kremlin’s main weapon when it comes to North Korean affairs. Relations between Moscow and Pyongyang over the last quarter of a century could hardly be described as “friendly,” it must be said; yet there has never been bilateral animosity, either. Moscow has afforded North Korean dictators a remarkable degree of patience and accommodation over the years.

For instance, Russia’s authorities barely batted an eyelid when North Korea conducted nuclear tests 200km from the Russian border, or when they launched ballistic missiles and seized Russian civilian vessels in the open sea. The Kremlin has even turned a blind eye to threats made towards citizens in the Russian Far East.

By adopting such an approach, Moscow consciously allows the Kim regime the space for a diplomatic maneuver given the strong economic and political “embrace” provided by Beijing, granting a diplomatic relief valve for North Korea from pressure emanating from the US and its allies in the region. Russia makes clear to North Korean dictators that they can always count on its understanding; the Kremlin’s [repeated proposals to collaborate on joint economic projects](#) serve as evidence in this regard.

Whether the incumbent authorities of the DPRK can truly rely on the Russian leadership — or whether the hospitable city of Khabarovsk, where Kim Il Sung once found shelter and Kim Jong Il was born, will open its doors to them — are moot points at this stage. What matters is that Russia is taking advantage of the fears of the North Korean ruling class and is trying to instil hope in them that Moscow offers at the least a fall back. Due to this, Moscow wants to secure a seat alongside the major negotiators on the North Korean issue regardless of what the circumstances may be.

Is there a military option?

The possibility of using military force, as the Kremlin has in other parts of the world, would not be so straightforward in the case of North Korea. The problem lies in the specifics of the deployment of Russian troops, the transport infrastructure in the region and its general geography. In the event of a serious crisis on

the Korean Peninsula, Moscow would simply be incapable of acting as decisively as it has in Syria.

Moreover, if we take a look at the major Russian military exercises undertaken in the Pacific region - [Vostok 2010](#) and [Vostok 2014](#) - they largely focused on defense. The drills involved providing coverage at deployment locations and for Russian patrol submarines bearing ballistic missiles in addition to amphibious landings on the islands, combatting the advancement of troops on the ground and such like. Such exercises revealed the Kremlin's view of the world, born of its fears stemming from the economic backwardness of Russia's eastern regions.

First of all, the fears of powerful countries in the Pacific region - the US and Japan - are observable. These fears emerged back in 1904-1905 during the Russo-Japanese War and Japanese intervention of 1918-1922. Secondly, Russia is also wary of China despite Moscow's attempts to create a semblance of long-term cooperation with Beijing on an equal footing.

Military exercises did not involve fully-fledged missions of the Russian army in preparation for a military crisis in North Korea. Any speculation about Russia preparing its troops for a refugee crisis is groundless. It is worth remembering that the border between Russia and the DPRK is short, inaccessible at certain points and that it traverses sparsely populated areas.

Still, if we imagine that the developments on the Korean peninsula unfold in line with a military scenario, Moscow does have one means by which it could use its military force. This option involves taking control over the North Korean nuclear test site - part of the North Korean nuclear program situated closest to Russian territory. In this case, Moscow will occupy a strong position, having left the US, South Korea, the People's Republic of China and Japan to deal with other problems and bear the major political, economic and military costs.

The tactics behind a postponed decision

As a result, the Kremlin need not take any steps in the context of the current exacerbation of an international situation surrounding North Korea. All other stakeholders share an interest in maintaining the status quo. Besides, they are unlikely to find a common solution to the nuclear and missile problem of the DPRK without involving Russia. Attempts at exerting pressure on Pyongyang undertaken by the US and China could, in the best-case scenario, postpone the next nuclear test but will do little to alter the broader picture.

The major difficulty lies in the fact that it is impossible to force North Korea to abandon its nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles programs merely through diplomatic means. There are only two possible scenarios according to which North Korea will give up on nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles: a transient domestic political and economic transformation of the Kim regime successfully avoided for decades or should the DPRK take steps which make a military response impossible to avoid which constitutes the worst nightmare of all politicians and diplomats in the region.

Moscow continues to show favor to Pyongyang while maintaining sufficient minimum diplomatic relations against the backdrop of endlessly postponed international decision-making. However, Russia's goal would be participation in the denuclearization of North Korea, should a military crisis break out on the Korean peninsula; Russia can fulfill this objective without having to bear the brunt of any serious costs.

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