

Russia-South Korea Relations: On Bumpy Parallel Roads

Alexander Z. Zhebin

Alexander Z. Zhebin, PhD in Political Science
Institute of China and Contemporary Asia, Russian Academy of Sciences, Moscow, Russia
Center for Korean Studies
Leading Research Fellow

SPIN RSIC: 250455
ORCID: 0000-0002-3060-2390
ResearcherID: AAZ-7050-2020
Scopus AuthorID: 55825095500

E-mail: alexzheb1948@gmail.com
Tel. +7 9637223982
Address: 32 Nakhimovsky Prospect, Moscow 117997, Russia

DOI: 10.31278/1810-6374-2023-21-2-198-204

Anatoly V. Torkunov and Kim Hak-chun (eds). *Russia-South Korea Relations in the Format of Parallel History (Russian-language edition).* Moscow: Aspect Press, 2022 – 972 p.

At the end of 2022, the results of perhaps the most ambitious joint undertaking by Russian and South Korean scholars—the aforementioned publication, was presented by video link simultaneously in Moscow and Seoul.

The main thing about this solid folio (almost one-thousand-page volume in Russian and two-volume edition in Korean) is that the team

of co-authors comprising thirteen Russian and twelve South Korean scholars agreed to scrutinize more than a century and a half of the history of Russia-Korea relations in ten chapters, with each offering the view of both Russian and South Korean specialists on a certain historical stage of the relations.

Such a format, as the project's chief on the Russian side Anatoly V. Torkunov, a member of the Russian Academy of Sciences, noted, had been tested before jointly by Russian authors and their Polish and Japanese counterparts and had proven successful enough. It enables scholars in either country to present

their own vision of the same events, while simultaneous publication in two languages makes the fruits of collective endeavor almost instantly available to readerships in both countries.

Initially, the project was to be completed in three years. The authors were determined to get the publication ready for release even sooner than that—just in time for the celebration of the 30th anniversary of Russia-South Korea diplomatic relations in September 2020. Regrettably, the coronavirus epidemic that broke out early that year thwarted this fine plan. So, only one of the three planned joint conferences to discuss the book's content was held face-to-face. An online exchange of views helped bring the positions on some crucial issues closer together.

The history of relations between Russia and South Korea, like their own histories, is exceptionally rich and diverse. It contains both glorious and very dramatic periods as well as ambiguous episodes that have had different interpretations. In a situation like this the contributing authors thought that it would be “valuable to present first-hand vision of this history, discuss these topics directly with each other and let the whole world know the content of this discussion.” The authors maintained that without such a debate about the

past it would be impossible to hear and understand each other today and to build the future together.

To make the opinion of both sides be heard well enough, the co-editors, Anatoly V. Torkunov and Professor Kim Hak-chun (who throughout his career worked in the administrations of the South Korean presidents and later headed media companies and universities in the Republic of Korea), intentionally refrained from harmonizing the texts prepared by the Russian and South Korean authors. Each of the ten chapters consists of two parts, presenting the view of Russian and South Korean scholars on the same event or period of bilateral relations.

As a result, the authors managed to deliver the first-ever study of 150-years-long history of Russia's contacts with the Korean Peninsula, which, among other things, examines Russia's relations with both North Korea and South Korea.

The Korean-language readership will be interested, above all, in the Russian vision of the main topics in focus, while the Russian readership will find it interesting to learn how the same events are interpreted in today's South Korea. Incidentally, Russian readers will have more “food for thought” than the Korean ones. As a matter of fact, despite the agreed scheme that the twin parts of each chapter would be approximately

equal in size, many Korean sections turned out to be two or even three times longer than the texts on the same topic offered by Russian scholars. This can be partly explained by different traditions of historical schools. The Korean partners paid far more attention (and space) to describing individual historical figures, their doings, and various details that Russian historians would consider insignificant at the very least and certainly not having a fundamental impact on the course of history.

However, it is encouraging to see that the assessments of some milestone episodes in the bilateral relations by South Korean authors are basically identical or very similar to the opinions of Russian Koreanologists. Assessing the early period of Russian-Korean relations, Professor Choi Dokkyu writes that “the establishment of Korea-Russia diplomatic relations provided a new opportunity for the Korean government to take steps to maintain the country’s security” (p. 73). And on the eve of and during the Sino-Japanese war, Russia pursued a “policy of refraining from ... interference in Korea’s internal political affairs” (p. 81).

Consonant with Russian assessments is Choi’s conclusion that one of the reasons for the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-1905 should

be found in “the United States’ participation, along with Japan and Britain, in a policy aimed to block Russia’s access to the Pacific Ocean” (p. 93). Choi believes that “for the United States, which considered the Pacific Ocean a space for promoting its own prosperity and future opportunities, the emergence of Russia as a new rival was unacceptable” (p. 96).

The Russian readership will certainly be interested in Choi’s analysis of attempts by the then Korean government to proclaim Korea’s neutrality and attain international legal recognition, in order to avoid the country’s involvement in the Russo-Japanese war and prevent hostilities on its territory. However, U.S. President T. Roosevelt at that time “tended to opt for Korea’s transformation into a Japanese protectorate rather than for its neutrality.”

Analyzing Russian-Korean relations after the Russo-Japanese War up to the moment of Japan’s annexation of Korea in 1910, Choi concludes that “during that period Russia objected, stronger than other powers, to changes in the international position of Korea and exerted the most significant efforts for helping it preserve its independence” (p. 114).

The year 2023 will see two significant “Korean” anniversaries:

the 75th anniversary of the creation of two Korean states—the Republic of Korea (August 15, 1948) and the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea that appeared three weeks later (September 9, 1948), and the 70th anniversary of the signing of the Korean Armistice Agreement that stopped the 1950-1953 Korean War,—perhaps the most tragic and bloodiest conflict in Korean history, which completely ruined the country and claimed millions of lives, but has not been terminated officially so far. The Korean Armistice Agreement, signed on July 27, 1953, merely put an end to hostilities on the line of engagement, but politicians and experts still debate how to end the war legally at the interstate level.

This historical period (1945-1953) is described in Chapters 3 and 4. It is noteworthy that both the Russian and South Korean authors of these sections relied mainly on documents from Russian archives and their translations into Korean, published in South Korea. The archives in the U.S., South Korea, and other countries concerning this period largely remain inaccessible for researchers, which has made it possible to obsessively allege for many years that the Soviet Union and the DPRK are to blame for starting that war, while it is quite clear that both sides had been getting ready for it.

It is small wonder that the South Korean authors of these chapters shied away from a serious analysis of what the U.S. was doing in the south of the peninsula during the five years before the eruption of hostilities. Likewise, they preferred to painstakingly avoid a discussion (whenever and however possible) of the U.S.’s role in masterminding this conflict.

The Western media and a number of studies published in the United States and some other countries have provided enough evidence of the brutal crackdown on popular protests by the Syngman Rhee regime, including mass atrocities committed with the support and often under the guidance of the U.S. military during the brutal suppression of the 1948 uprising on Cheju Island.

All the more surprising, to say the least, is the claim by one of the Russian authors, Natalia Kim, that “commitment to the values of freedom and democracy, albeit in a somewhat truncated form [!?] during the military occupation, made the U.S. authorities’ policy towards the opposition groups milder than in the case of North Korea” (p. 299).

Meanwhile, Professor Min Kyung Hyun of Korea University, in his analysis of the first orders issued by the Soviet military command in the northern part of Korea, comes to

the conclusion that “Stalin ordered not to introduce Soviet rules in northern territories of Korea and to provide support for forming bourgeois authorities from local political parties and organizations” as he considered this region to be “at the bourgeois-democratic stage of development” (p. 323).

Similarly, Dr. Shim Heon-yong of the Institute for Military History under South Korea’s Ministry of National Defense could not resist the temptation to slightly “edit” history. He writes that the UN Command in Korea was created pursuant to UN Security Council Resolution 84 of July 7, 1950. However, the text of this rather brief document refers to a “unified command” and by no means a “UN command.” The latter name was, in fact, usurped by the United States and appeared for the first time a month later in a report submitted to the UN Security Council by a U.S. general who was entrusted with heading the aforesaid “unified command.”

It is unknown how other members of the UN Security Council reacted to such “editing” of the resolution at that time. Anyhow, its effects are still in sight. The UN command in Korea has survived to this day and is still invariably led by successive U.S. generals, with the UN blue flag still impudently used by the nearly 30,000-strong U.S. military

contingent stationed in the south of the peninsula.

The Russian reader can find quite a bit of new information in Chapter 5 that covers relations between the Soviet Union and the DPRK from the end of the Korean War and up until the breakup of the USSR. As a matter of fact, during that period the real acute problems in the bilateral relations and the true situation in the DPRK itself, especially the internal strife in the ruling Workers’ Party of Korea (WPK), the change of the political system and the official ideology of that country remained closed to the public at large and could be inferred only from diplomatic messages and analytical memorandums by the Soviet and some other embassies in Pyongyang, as well as from classified works by an extremely narrow circle of researchers.

Professor Ki Kwang-Seo of Chosun University notes that “North Korea was well aware that it might need the Soviet Union’s help to survive and develop its own statehood ... Even if disagreements did occur between the two countries, they were exclusively the subject matter of bilateral relations, and talking about them openly was against the rules” (pp. 449-450).

Both sides tried to observe this code of conduct until the Soviet Union established diplomatic

relations with the Republic of Korea on September 30, 1990. Ten days after this event, an article entitled “Diplomatic Relations—the Subject of a Contract of Sale for Dollars,” published in the WPK’s central newspaper *Rodong Sinmun*, drew a line under this stage of the bilateral relations.

In the early 1990s, the prevailing attitude of the Russian leadership towards the DPRK is well seen in an unprecedented turn-up in the New Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation that predicted “inevitable distancing from the DPRK” (p. 699).

The history of the establishment and development of relations between Russia and the Republic of Korea is studied much better and more accessible to contemporaries. However, it is worth noting that, contrary to a widely held opinion, this process had begun long before the period of *perestroika* and *glasnost* in the Soviet Union that is customarily associated with the establishment of our relations. As the Russian authors say in Chapter 6, “the search for a new course with regard to the Korean Peninsula began much earlier and was linked with the global processes that had swept the world” (p. 500). For example, the Soviet government’s statement on security on the Korean Peninsula dated December 7, 1960, said: “One cannot but reckon with

the fact that, in essence, two states with different political and economic systems have taken shape on the Korean Peninsula” (p. 500).

Analyzing the relations between the Republic of Korea and Russia over the past thirty years, Professor Eom Gu Ho of Hanyang University in Seoul concludes that, although our countries have established “relations of strategic partnership and cooperation,” “it would not be an exaggeration to say that at the moment they are a formality rather than a reality” (p. 556). Professor Hong Wansuk of the Institute of Foreign Languages agrees. In his section of Chapter 8, devoted to the thirty-year-long history of our relations, he admits that “the relations of strategic partnership based on cooperation” between Russia and the Republic of Korea remain “at the level of diplomatic rhetoric” (p. 692).

The past years have shown, writes Eom Gu Ho, that “the expansion of economic cooperation ... does not automatically mean greater political trust.” Moreover, “the excessive orientation of the Republic of Korea towards an alliance with the United States has had far from a positive impact on forming a multilateral foreign policy in Northeast Asia” (p. 558). In essence, Eom uses this politically correct wording to describe a well-known fact:

the United States is increasingly unceremonious in demanding that Seoul curtail relations, primarily trade and economic ties, with Moscow and Beijing.

The South Korean authors admit that the participation of South Korean businesses in large-scale development projects in the Russian Far East and projects of trilateral cooperation by Russia, the DPRK, and the Republic of Korea “in a situation where the United States has enforced tough sanctions against North Korea and Russia has been hard-going” (p. 733).

At the same time, many of the Korean historians’ arguments border on speculation or, at least, are far from being indisputable. Some argue that the Soviet Union “sought to actively use the improvement of ties with the Republic of Korea to build ... relations with Tokyo” (p. 589), and that Russia’s steps to develop relations with the DPRK in the 2000s were allegedly motivated by “rivalry” with China and even by attempts at its “containment” (pp. 620, 631).

The last two chapters of the monograph are devoted to trade, economic and investment cooperation between Russia and South Korea, as well as humanitarian relations and cultural exchanges.

It is difficult to disagree that “the scale, directions and achievements of economic cooperation do not satisfy either side” (p. 797). A whole lot more encouraging are the results of cooperation in the field of culture. Both sides consider its prospects very promising.

The co-authors of the monograph were fortunate to have completed their work before the start of Russia’s special military operation in Ukraine. Otherwise, their conclusions and forecasts might have been much more pessimistic, especially given the Republic of Korea’s decision to join most of the Western sanctions against Russia.

All the abovesaid nuances do not belittle the significance of what the two countries’ scholars have accomplished. Such fundamental works on the history of relations between Russia and South Korea have not been published before. The monograph is undoubtedly unique; its release has become not only an outstanding event in the history of Korean studies in Russia and Russian studies in Korea, but also a milestone in the history of scientific and cultural cooperation between the two countries. It is to be hoped that more such events will follow.