

# Russia's Relations with the Korean Peninsula States in Perspective

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## **Abstract**

The article assesses prospects for the development of relations between the Russian Federation and the Korean Peninsula states in the short and medium terms. By assessing their current state in the context of global changes in the world, the authors determine areas where the national interests of Russia, North Korea and South Korea overlap, identify factors that can influence the development of relations between Russia and these states (primarily bilateral, but also taking into account the third party's influence on them), and consider possible trajectories for their further evolution. The article concludes that in the short term, relations between Russia and South Korea will tend to deteriorate, although the speed of this deterioration will depend on the steps to be taken by Seoul. Relations between Moscow and Pyongyang, on the contrary, will formally improve, although the speed of this improvement will be determined, among other things, by the situation around the Korean Peninsula nuclear issue.

**Keywords:** Russia, the Korean Peninsula, Russian-Korean relations, special military operation, crisis of the world order, sanctions, cooperation.

The current “global turbulence” can be described as a changing world order in which the old footholds of the global security architecture are crumbling while new ones have not yet formed. Importantly, the Ukraine crisis has catalyzed these processes, but it did not cause them. The latest developments make one wonder what Russia's relations with the two Korean states will be like in the new era. Hence this article focuses not so much on assessing the present situation as on forecasting the development of relations between Russia and the Korean Peninsula states in the future. With this in view, we briefly describe the current state of affairs and the national interests of the three countries, and attempt to find overlapping areas. The study aims to identify the key factors that will affect the global and regional situation, and outline scenarios for the development of relations and their markers. Finally, the paper offers some recommendations on how Russia can build relations with North Korea and South Korea.

## **NATIONAL INTERESTS OF RUSSIA, SOUTH KOREA AND NORTH KOREA: AREAS OF INTERSECTION**

### **Russia's national interests**

According to the new Foreign Policy Concept, one of the country's three strategic goals on the world stage is to "strengthen its positions... as one of the responsible, influential, and independent centers of the modern world" (Concept, 2023). In other words, as the world order changes, Russia needs to retain the position it held in the old one (great-power status and the international standing matching its position as a permanent member of the UN Security Council with veto power). In practical terms, this is achieved in three ways:

- Building up its own capabilities, primarily military and economic ones;
- Trying to maintain ties with relatively friendly countries in the collective West. Despite its "turn to the East" rhetoric, Russia largely remains part of the West in value and economic terms;
- Looking for relative allies if not to rely on then at least show that Russia is not a pariah state and that it is a question of bloc confrontation. Often, these quasi-allied relations emerge in the face of a common threat from the United States and its allies.

### **South Korea's national interests imply:**

- maintaining a "global comprehensive strategic alliance" (Yonhap, 2023b) with the U.S. as a guarantor of the country's security. At the same time, Seoul seeks to avoid a situation in which rapprochement with the United States will push it away from the U.S. opponents, let alone draw it into an open conflict to the detriment of South Korea's national interests;
- maintaining diversified foreign economic relations that ensure the country's economic growth through trade and investment;
- strengthening the country's position on the world stage as a "global responsible" middle power (Britova, 2023).

**North Korea's national interests** call for preserving the sovereignty of the state (understood by some experts narrower as keeping power in the hands of today's ruling elite) and for achieving the following goals:

- ensuring deterrence capabilities through both military and political measures;
- creating conditions for economic development and improving the standard of living of the population, including through a moderate expansion of foreign economic relations and their diversification (complete economic dependence on China can become acceptable for the North Korean leadership only if there is no other way for the political elite to keep power).

This combination of goals creates both potential opportunities (and limitations) for cooperation and reasons for possible discord. Just like for Russia, it is important for North Korea to find allies. South Korea puts emphasis on preserving the “global strategic alliance” with the United States, while at the same time trying not to upset relations with Russia, which Seoul considers an influential neighbor of North Korea and with which it maintains significant economic ties. In 2021, Russia ranked tenth among South Korea's trading partners; it supplied more than 40% of its imported anthracite coal, and 6% of natural gas and oil (Haggard, 2022). In addition, some South Korean chaebols (primarily Lotte, Hyundai, and Samsung) have large investment projects in Russia, secession from which would cost them hundreds of millions of dollars.

Neither North Korea nor South Korea has economic, let alone political, interests in Ukraine, the loss of which could seriously affect their well-being. Public opinion in South Korea views Russia's special military operation in Ukraine as some kind of “a conflict on the edge of the map,” which has no immediate impact on the country. Pyongyang has even less to lose from a breakup with Ukraine or from sanctions for supporting the Lugansk and Donetsk People's Republics, which are negligible in impact compared to the overall pressure put on it over its nuclear missile program.

## **CURRENT RUSSIA-NORTH KOREA RELATIONS**

Before the start of the special military operation in Ukraine, Russia tried to pursue a balanced policy towards the Korean Peninsula states (Asmolov and Zakharova, 2020). Moscow provided moderate political support to North Korea as a good friend and neighbor without encouraging its nuclear ambitions. Economically, although Russia was considered North Korea's second largest trading partner after China, its trade turnover with Pyongyang was one-fiftieth of Beijing's. Attempts to step up economic cooperation after the debt problem was settled in 2014 did not produce significant results as the sanctions pressure on North Korea continued to increase. Until May 26, 2022, Moscow could argue with Washington over the severity of sanctions for a new nuclear test or missile launch, but there was no doubt that Pyongyang's advances in the development of its nuclear missile potential would trigger more sanctions.

Generally, Russia supported international sanctions against North Korea because the position of a permanent member of the UN Security Council was more important than good relations with Pyongyang. In particular, Russia was even forced to close its borders to North Korean workers who were an important labor resource for its Far Eastern regions. According to local construction companies, North Koreans accounted for about 30% of all builders in Primorsky Krai in 2017 (PrimaMedia.ru, 2017).

The first sign of real changes in Russia's policy came when, on May 26, 2022, it vetoed a new U.S. sanctions resolution at the UN Security Council. After that, Moscow, acting jointly with Beijing, has been curbing American attempts to impose new sanctions. At the same time, some Russian and South Korean experts say that North Korea will not conduct a nuclear test in the foreseeable future because this could hurt its ties with China and Russia.

And yet, cooperation between Moscow and Pyongyang is developing much more slowly. There are several reasons for that.

**Firstly**, it is North Korea's bad "credit reputation." Since Soviet times, North Korea has been known as a not very reliable trading partner, and a significant part of business people who have dealt with it keep

the existing risks in mind. Entitlement mentality in relations with socialist countries in Soviet times manifested itself both in North Korea's constant failure to honor its obligations, including the redistribution of scarce export goods in favor of partners from capitalist countries, and in attempts to hike export prices (Toloraya, 1984). The situation did not change dramatically in 2014-2015, when the parties moved to boost bilateral trade. The Russian group of companies Sever lost about \$2 million because of the North Korean partner's failure to fulfill its obligations under a barter contract (Leshakov and Solovyov, 2022).

Added to the negative past experience is a lack of knowledge about modern North Korea and its competitive advantages. In order to eliminate these information gaps, it is necessary to expand civil and academic exchanges supported at the governmental level.

**Secondly**, uncertainty always scares more, which is why people cling to the old stereotypes. One of them is that when dealing with North Korea, priority should be given to international institutions, meaning, among other things, diligent compliance, sometimes even overcompliance, with the sanctions regime.

The arguments of those who advocate this approach can be divided into two groups. The first one boils down to the fact that contacts with North Korea cause reputational damage to Russia because it supports a rogue state. However, this damage is relevant only for a certain audience, for which Russia's reputational losses from the special military operation in Ukraine outweigh its contacts with North Korea. In the eyes of this group, which should not be identified with the entire international community, Moscow's reputation is already so low that additional accusations will not do any more damage, and, therefore, this factor can be ignored.

What is much more important is that if Russia begins to openly violate UN Security Council resolutions, for which it voted as a permanent member, this may provide grounds for launching a Security Council reform or excluding Russia from it, while this is practically the only tool Russia has now to advance its position at the UN. Moscow is not yet ready to sacrifice its status of a permanent member of the UN Security Council for the sake of North Korea.

*Thirdly*, the peculiarities of bureaucracy, not only in Russia as a matter of fact, play a role too. In difficult situations, when it is clear that the rules will change, but the previous ones are still in force, officials act with excessive caution, which they consider quite reasonable, and are often afraid to even say out loud that they will soon have to act in a new way. However, in Sino-North Korean relations there have been periods of both strict compliance with all regulations (especially in 2017) and of a more pragmatic approach to the development of cross-border ties.

### **CURRENT RUSSIA-SOUTH KOREA RELATIONS**

Earlier, priority in Russia's relations with South Korea was given to economic partnership, and although even the term 'strategic partnership' was officially used, the actual level of cooperation did not match it. Nevertheless, South Korea consistently ranked among Russia's top ten trading partners. According to Russian statistics, in 2021, trade turnover with South Korea amounted to \$29.9 billion, which put South Korea in eighth place among Russia's trading partners. Its importance was even higher for the Far Eastern regions of Russia: South Korea accounted for 26.4% of the Far Eastern Federal District's foreign trade (second after China) (Far Eastern Customs Administration, 2022). Moreover, there are no intractable problems in Russian-South Korean relations. There may be some unpleasant myths, but they do not matter if they are not purposefully stirred up.

In the current situation, despite official rhetoric, South Korea is seeking to maintain relations with Russia, hoping that they will get back to normal after the end of the special military operation in Ukraine.

The special military operation is not perceived as an event that radically changes the nature of relations between the two countries or as confrontation over different models of values promoted by "democratic Korea" and "authoritarian Russia." We can also note the absence of Russophobia, and the fact that rallies in support of Ukraine are organized by Russian-speaking South Koreans, whose political views are close to those of the opposition Democratic Party (The Korea Times, 2022), and have no mass support. It was the NGOs associated

with the Democratic Party that criticized the government for the detention of anti-war Russian asylum seekers in the departure area of Incheon International Airport (The Korea Times, 2023a).

From the very first days of the West's anti-Russian sanctions, South Korea reluctantly dragged behind. In 2014, the South Korean leadership did not officially impose any restrictions, but in 2022, Seoul had to demonstrate its solidarity. South Korea joined the West's financial sanctions against Russian banks, government bonds and funds, and supported a ban on the export of strategic materials to Russia. In response, Moscow included South Korea in the official list of foreign states and territories committing unfriendly actions against Russia. However, unlike European and Japanese businesses, South Korean companies were in no hurry to leave the Russian market even despite logistic and transactional difficulties (Zueva, Samsonova, 2022).

All these steps caused a decline in bilateral trade. According to the Korean International Trade Association (KITA), South Korean exports to Russia in 2022 decreased by 37%, and imports fell by 15%. Most affected were automobiles and other motor vehicles, as well as spare parts for them. The supply of oil and petroleum products from Russia dropped significantly. At the same time, the import of coal, frozen fish, and raw aluminum increased. In addition, 2022 saw a sharp rise in trade between South Korea and Russia's EAEU partners: exports to Kyrgyzstan increased by 231%, and to Kazakhstan by 115% (Korea International Trade Association Statistics). South Korean experts believe that in the current situation business can use neighboring countries for transit in order to maximize profits and reduce risks (The Korea Times, 2023b).

In general, South Korean companies do not want to leave the Russian market despite criticism, seeking to keep their business and even strengthen their positions after the departure of Western competitors. A number of South Korean companies beefed up their profits in Russia in 2022, but some large corporations (Samsung Electronics, LG Electronics, Hyundai Motor) are beginning to consider scaling down their Russian operations as the conflict in Ukraine drags on (Korea JoongAng Daily, 2023).

From the point of view of official Seoul, South Korea is taking the minimal required steps so as to say that it is together with the “international community” on anti-Russian sanctions, but it has no intention of crossing the red lines unless there is outside pressure, and emphasizes that arms deals with its participation have no purpose of selling weapons specifically to Ukraine through intermediaries. In this context, Seoul hopes for “business as usual,” expecting that Moscow will understand its position that can be described as “we are for sanctions, but, in fact, we have done just the required minimum and are ready to cooperate,” although it presents at least two problems for Moscow: the very fact of joining the sanctions and the lack of guarantees that Seoul will not impose new sanctions if the situation changes.

Nevertheless, Moscow (for the time being) does not want to aggravate relations unless Seoul crosses the line. At the 2022 Valdai Discussion Club meeting, Putin “warned” Seoul about what Moscow would consider such a line (the supply of weapons and ammunition to Ukraine) (Interfax, 2022). Nevertheless, there are enough “hawks” in the information field wishing to break off relations between Russia and South Korea (Tsargrad, 2023), and their positions may strengthen under certain circumstances.

On the other hand, U.S. pressure on South Korea over Ukraine is growing, and periodic U.S. (The Wall Street Journal, 2022; 2023) and European (for example, iDNES, 2022) media reports on covert arms deals of this kind are an element of this pressure. Yet American secret document leaks in April 2023 show (The New York Times, 2023) that, despite pressure from Washington and fears that President Biden will raise this issue with Seoul point blank, South Korea's position remains unchanged, and its authorities are looking for possible loopholes (Asmolov, 2023).

In an interview with Reuters ahead of his visit to the United States at the end of April 2023, President Yoon Suk Yeol said: “If there is a situation the international community cannot condone, such as any large-scale attack on civilians, massacre or serious violation of the laws of war, it might be difficult for us to insist only on humanitarian or financial support” (Reuters, 2023). Moscow took this as a sign of

readiness to change the policy, which angered a number of politicians, including former President Dmitry Medvedev (TASS, 2023), particularly after Seoul, prior to the visit, had significantly expanded the list of goods the supply of which to Russia would require a separate permit (RIA Novosti, 2023).

However, neither the presidents' joint statement (Yonhap, 2023b) nor Yoon's speech at the U.S. Congress signaled any policy change. Moreover, the White House said this issue was not on the summit agenda (Yonhap, 2023a). Yoon's meetings with the Ukrainian president's special envoy Elena Zelenskaya on May 16, and with President Vladimir Zelensky himself on the sidelines of the G7 summit in Hiroshima did not lead to any change in South Korea's policy either.

Meanwhile, maintaining relations with the United States is an absolute priority for Seoul. There is an opinion that if greater pressure is exerted (a direct demand by the U.S. president at a summit or by phone), Yoon Suk Yeol will give in. However, at the time of writing this article, the South Korean leadership stood its ground even though the above events were a good enough reason to change its position.

## **FACTORS THAT MAY AFFECT THE SITUATION**

*The first factor* that affects the situation, and not only on the peninsula, is the speed with which the existing world order is changing. Although in the authors' opinion, the transformation of the global security architecture is already underway, the pace of entering the "new world" may vary.

The speed of change in the world order also determines the extent to which Russia and China can ignore those of its elements that were previously considered inviolable, such as, for example, compliance with UN Security Council sanctions resolutions. This is due to the fact that in the "new world" the UN can be perceived not so much as an impartial world arbiter, but as a biased institution imposing the will of the "collective West" and passing it off as the will of the "international community." In such a situation, compliance with the "sanctions recommendations" will lose priority or will generally be ignored completely, secretly at first, and then openly.

The speed with which the former world order is falling apart also increases the likelihood of using methods that were previously deemed unacceptable from the ethical and other points of view. The order based on uniform rules will be replaced with “Hottentot morality” and the slogan “the end justifies the means.” This may include provocations and the use of hitherto prohibited or socially condemned methods of warfare.

For example, there may be attempts to put Seoul in a hopeless situation. Knowing Moscow's reaction to possible arms supplies to Ukraine (including a situation where weapons can de facto be provided to replace armaments supplied by the United States and its allies), one can expect that South Korean weapons delivered to the United States, Canada or Poland may end up in Ukraine without Seoul's knowledge. In this case, Seoul will not be able to prove that it was not aware of such supplies, and Moscow will have to take decisive retaliatory steps that will seriously damage interaction between Russia and South Korea.

Another way to stage a provocation could be an attempt to provide examples of the war crimes or killings of civilians mentioned by President Yoon, after which the South Korean leader would have to deliver on his promise. On April 28, 2023, the Ukrainian ambassador to South Korea already made the first such attempt, sharing photos of destroyed apartment buildings on his Twitter account and asking: “Isn't this the very example of a large-scale attack on civilians that the Korean leader previously mentioned?” (The Korea Times, 2023c).

*The second factor*, also global, is the overall level of confrontation between Russia and China, on the one hand, and the collective West, on the other. It is connected with the Ukraine conflict, but does not entirely depend on it.

The resulting increased division of the world may not necessarily lead to a new Cold War, but the single international space (political, economic, cultural, information, etc.) will fall apart into blocs, and middle powers will be forced to join one of them. Benefits and threats from joining a particular bloc will, of course, differ, but the very logic of bloc confrontation implies a global escalation of tensions rather than conciliation. In such a situation, an armed conflict with the use

of tactical nuclear weapons cannot be excluded. This trend manifests itself in four different aspects within the framework of the topic being discussed. Firstly, the sanctions pressure will increase regardless of the outcome of the special military operation. In one case sanctions will be presented as “punishment of the loser,” and in the other case as deterrence against a successful aggressor. Secondly, the Russian market is turning into a “falling” one for South Korean business and will remain such. Thirdly, the inter-Korean confrontation will also intensify. Although it may not come to direct clashes, both sides will maximize their military potential. In addition, the Biden administration believes that sanctions will be able to crush the regime, so no rapprochement between the United States and North Korea can be possible. Fourthly, South Korea has less and less possibilities for maneuver, while the role of Chinese “informal sanctions,” on the contrary, is growing.

The collapse of the world order and increasing escalation suggest that the nuclear non-proliferation regime will also crumble. Middle powers, especially “threshold” ones, including Japan and South Korea, will try to resume or accelerate existing nuclear programs (Orlov and Semenov, 2023).

*The third factor* is the special military operation in Ukraine. Firstly, the operation is distracting attention, making North Korea virtually irrelevant. As new blocs emerge, Moscow and Beijing are not going to condemn their ally unless it does something outrageous. Secondly, the longer the special military operation continues, the less likely the relations between Russia and South Korea are to normalize.

*The fourth factor* is the situation in South Korea itself, where the president changes every five years. The current political confrontation in the country may end with an attempt to impeach the incumbent head of state. But even if the Democratic Party comes to power ahead of time, the country’s policy is unlikely to become more independent—rather the opposite. Despite the anti-American rhetoric of some of their leaders, relations between Moscow and Seoul will not improve if they come to power. There are several reasons for that.

Firstly, the logic of the political struggle will prompt them to act “not like under Yoon,” and while he avoided confrontation with

Moscow, they will aggravate bilateral relations by criticizing him for not having protected the ideals of democracy hard enough. “Progressists” are already criticizing Russia’s actions quite vigorously (Hankyoreh, 2022).

Secondly, as far as the value guidelines of “liberal democracy” and “universal values” are concerned, Democrats look up to the United States even more than conservatives. A good example is Moon Jae-in’s policy of abandoning nuclear power, undertaken largely in order to “be in the trend.”

Thirdly, the Democrats, who seek the U.S. approval of their inter-Korean strategy aimed at interaction with North Korea, will have to listen more carefully to Washington’s wishes regarding the policy in other areas, including relations with Russia (Torin, 2022).

However, a shift towards a more anti-Russian course may also occur if, amidst the struggle between the ruling party and the opposition, President Yoon needs to strengthen his leadership in the conservative party by switching to more right-wing conservative positions.

However, even if Yoon does not want to aggravate relations with Moscow, he will still have to do so under pressure from Washington, on the one hand, and from classic conservatives, on the other.

## **SCENARIOS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENTS**

This situation allows us to outline several key scenarios. The first one can be very tentatively called *most optimistic*, and it is based on the preservation of the status quo. Relations between Moscow and Seoul do not undergo major changes. South Korea enforces minimal sanctions, maintaining economic and cultural contacts with Russia. The latter is subject to minimal public censure and criticized openly only when Seoul “shares” the opinion of Tokyo or Washington in joint statements. Russia also refrains from condemning South Korea, which remains “the friendliest among the unfriendly countries.”

This is not the best scenario for Russia, but de facto the most realistic and optimistic one. A scenario under which the special military operation ends and South Korea regains ground seems more favorable but less likely. Firstly, the Russia-West macro confrontation

will not stop. Secondly, if Ukraine fully surrenders, the international community will continue to chastise Russia as an aggressor, which may force Seoul to take additional steps triggering further sanctions.

Russia's partial victory will be more acceptable to Seoul, but it will only be possible if Russia gets stuck with something similar to the Minsk accords or a truce, which will be perceived inside the country as a defeat. In this case, the inevitable irritation-resentiment coupled with steps to distract attention, so typical of certain Russian politicians and government officials, can turn Russian-South Korean relations into some sort of a "valve to let off steam."

A scenario under which South Korea suddenly begins to pursue a significantly more independent policy is almost unreal, because Seoul will remain committed to American values even if the U.S. leadership changes.

The second block of scenarios implies a *sudden and almost complete break-up of relations between Moscow and Seoul*. This may lead to a certain rapprochement between Russia and North Korea. The situation will depend on who initiates the break-up: Seoul, which will cross the "red line" and provoke a Russian response; Washington, whose pressure or provocation will cause Seoul "to cross the red line without knowing it"; or Moscow for both foreign policy and internal political reasons.

These scenarios differ mainly in the degree of tension in relations. But in all cases, there will most likely be an active hunt for South Korean "foreign agents" in Russia and the dismantling of economic ties, up to the nationalization of South Korean assets in Russia.

The third block of scenarios implies *sharp moves by Pyongyang, which will force Russia to respond*. These may include a new nuclear test or escalation of the inter-Korean conflict to an unintended war, or something similar to the bombardment of Yeonpyeong Island in 2010 or the clashes at sea in 2002. This will put Moscow in a very difficult position, forcing it to openly make unpleasant choices.

The fourth block of scenarios implies a *sharp increase in mutual aid between Moscow and Pyongyang*, with the cooling of relations with South Korea to be its consequence rather than cause. Under these scenarios, Western speculation about arms supplies and more

may be true. The implementation of these scenarios will require a real need either for Pyongyang's help or for an impressive gesture—a demonstration of friendship to spite Seoul (this result can also be achieved under the second group of scenarios).

One way or another, there can be three options for open cooperation in defiance of sanctions. The first one means that the special military operation ends and North Korean assistance is needed to rebuild territories or replenish resources in the Far East. The second one implies the internationalization of the conflict in order to achieve the goals of the special military operation. The third option presupposes demonstrative cooperation with North Korea in response to South Korea's actions.

### **SCENARIO MARKERS**

There are several markers indicating that the situation develops according to one of the above scenarios.

Let us start with South Korea. Seoul has no obvious “vulnerable points” in relations with Russia (unlike in its relations with China or Japan), which can be pressed to cause a sudden breakup. Therefore, public opinion needs to be prepared for such a turn. The following signs may indicate that the South Korean government has decided to change its attitude towards Russia:

- Original media publications, which are not a reprint from Reuters or the AP, that severely criticize the special military operation. Change of rhetoric to actualize and dramatize events in Ukraine;
- Mainstream media reports propagating the view that Putin's imperial policy threatens the existence of South Korea because he is a spiritual heir to the Bezobrazov Clique;
- Revival of anti-Russian/anti-Soviet myths about “imperial aspirations with regard to Korea” or about Moscow's responsibility for the division of the peninsula and the Korean War, up to attempts to portray the resettlement of Koreans to Central Asia in 1937 as an act of genocide planned by the Soviet authorities in order to maintain good diplomatic relations with Japan;

- Support for “Russian-speaking anti-Russian picketers,” involving even pro-government NGOs, with Seoul’s replying to all complaints that South Korea is a democratic country and it has no right to suppress the will of the people. In the worst case, we can see regular anti-Russian demonstrations similar to weekly anti-Japanese ones;
- South Korea’s desire to preserve and subsequently develop relations with Russia is unlikely to be voiced publicly, for this would indicate a sharp turn towards Moscow, and so would any criticism of the Ukrainian leadership. Under a moderate scenario, more and more issues unpleasant for Russia will be hushed up, and new sanctions will be purely nominal.

South Korea’s voting at the UN can serve as a partial marker because it reflects primarily Seoul’s interaction with Washington.

Markers signaling the positive development of relations with North Korea include the resumption of bilateral trade and regular railway service, as well as the rotation of the embassy personnel in Pyongyang, its composition suggesting, with some assumption, what the country’s interests actually are.

Regular arms supplies from South Korea to Ukraine (regardless of the reasons) or North Korea’s nuclear test can also serve as markers. However, a nuclear test that Pyongyang needs to verify the reliability of warheads for its missiles is rather a marker indicating growing regional tension, along with following events:

- The return of U.S. nuclear weapons to South Korea in order to curb Seoul’s attempts to get its own. This can cause a domino effect;
- The resumption of large-scale military exercises involving Japan, which will greatly annoy Pyongyang. As a result, North Korea will launch more missiles flying over Japan;
- Joint military exercises of the United States and its allies coinciding with the exercises held by Russia and China;
- Continued drone raids which can provoke shootouts;
- Reinstallation of propaganda loudspeakers at the 38th parallel and the launching of propaganda leaflets to North Korea;

- Other demonstrations of force and propaganda activities on the anniversaries marking the end of the Korean War and the formation of the North and South Korea (both states will celebrate their 75th anniversary in 2023).

### **RECOMMENDATIONS AND CURRENT CONSIDERATIONS**

In any case, in the short term, relations between Russia and South Korea will tend to deteriorate, although the speed of this deterioration will depend on Seoul's moves. On the contrary, relations between Moscow and Pyongyang will formally improve, although the speed of this improvement will be determined, among other things, by the situation around the Korean Peninsula nuclear issue. However, it is impossible to resume full cooperation between the two countries because direct violation of the UN Security Council resolutions, for which Russia voted, would carry the risk of subsequent repressions.

In the medium term, the situation will depend on both the progress of the special military operation in Ukraine and other foreign policy factors, primarily growing tension between Russia and China, on the one hand, and the collective West, on the other. Unfortunately, the latter reduces the chances that the special military operation in Ukraine will end in a relatively short time. As for the security architecture on the Korean Peninsula, it is highly likely that in the new conditions it will be built without regard to the "inviolable" rules of the old world order.

In this context, the following recommendations can be given to Russia.

*In relation to North Korea*, different options should be considered for expanding cooperation both under the current UN Security Council sanctions and in a broader framework for "humanitarian considerations." However, all projects will have to be financed by Russia both due to the lack of funds in North Korea and due to its habit to work with Russia by the "economic benefits for geostrategic bonuses" principle. In addition, it makes sense to accurately assess what we can offer North Korea and what it can offer us in terms of strategic assistance if strict compliance with sanctions loses priority.

- North Korea can supply Russia with workers, primarily skilled specialists who know how to quickly build civilian facilities. North Korean builders proved quite efficient in 2016 and 2020, when after natural disasters (typhoons) many people had lost their homes and it was necessary to urgently build a large number of apartments before the onset of cold weather. The incorporation of four new regions into Russia and a large number of refugees from the conflict area require prompt measures to start new housing development projects. North Korea first showed its interest in rebuilding these territories after the Lugansk and Donetsk People's Republics had proclaimed independence, and in August 2022, Russian Deputy Prime Minister Marat Khusnullin did not rule out the possibility of engaging North Korean builders in such projects in Donbass (TASS, 2022).
- In order to avoid accusations of financing the North Korean nuclear program, a transparent payment system should be created, in which the part of the salary that goes to the North Korean state budget can be paid in kind, for example, in the form of food, medicine, fuel (within the limits established by the UN Security Council) or other unsanctioned commodities.
- If the confrontation between Russia and the West deepens, North Koreans can be engaged for building dual-use facilities (including roads or other elements of critical infrastructure), because they are known for the ability to build well-fortified defenses, including underground ones. However, any exposure of such activity may entail certain risks for North Korea that may be accused of participating in hostilities.
- For its part, Moscow may continue to provide regular humanitarian aid to North Korea. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Russia annually donated several million dollars to UN international organizations for aid to North Korea. In addition, tens of thousands of tons of grain were periodically sent through bilateral channels (for example, 50,000 tons of wheat were shipped in 2020). Given constant food shortages

in North Korea, Russia may provide targeted bilateral aid to North Korea using the funds that were previously transferred to international organizations for assistance to North Korea.

- After North Korea finally opens its borders and passenger traffic resumes, it would be worth considering ways to expand educational cooperation with Russia. North Koreans who speak Russian will be able to travel to Russia again for education, and Russian students will be able to study the Korean language in North Korea. Civil exchanges are very important for forming a realistic view of each other, as well as for training professionals for the further development of cooperation in other areas.
- We must not forget about the joint Khasan-Rajin project, the transport infrastructure of which was used by Russian companies until the end of 2017 to ship coal to China. China has always been more interested in developing the port of Rajin on its own, but now it could be possible to try to resume mutually beneficial trilateral interaction.
- There is also another “reason” for cooperation, namely the remainder of North Korea’s debt to Russia, which, according to the 2012 intergovernmental agreement (Agreement, 2012), can be used to finance educational, health, and energy projects in the North Korea as official Russian aid. UN Security Council sanctions prohibit investment in North Korea, but the implementation of joint projects through a debt settlement mechanism should not fall under this ban.
- A cross-border road bridge has been discussed for a long time. Its construction will most likely be financed by Russia. This project is very important if Russia plans to expand trade with North Korea. Since shipments at the initial stage will not be very large, a transport route providing supply flexibility and ensuring project recoupment will be in great demand. Even in the case of such an ambitious project as the inter-Korean Kaesong Industrial Complex, the bulk of cargoes were transported by truck, not by rail.

- Russia and North Korea can start holding joint sea search and rescue exercises already now (similar to those Russia conducts with China), which does not violate the UN Security Council sanctions.
- If the situation deteriorates, the two countries could consider developing security cooperation. In moderate form, this could mean the presence of North Korean military observers in Russia and their acquaintance with captured American or South Korean materiel. In severe form, these can be arms supplies (for a detailed description of the types of North Korean weapons and ammunition that may be useful in Donbass, see an article by Vladimir Khrustalev (2022)).
- But it would be better to avoid direct military (even voluntary) aid. Firstly, the participation of the Korean People's Army will cause a number of problems ranging from logistic to linguistic ones. Secondly, the presence of a large military contingent of a third country will evoke a negative reaction from Russian society as an indication that Russia does not have enough strength to win in Ukraine itself. Thirdly, the deployment of organized military contingents of a third country on one side opens up a similar opportunity for the other side, making it easier and more convenient for the collective West to deploy an equally large and well-armed contingent to help Ukraine. Fourthly, the internationalization of the war can also increase regional tensions on the Korean Peninsula.
- There are opinions that Russia should supply its newest weapons to North Korea. However this will be a demonstrative violation of the UN Security Council sanctions, which is not in Russia's interests. The purpose of such hypothetical supplies is not entirely clear either.

***In relation to South Korea***, Russia should consider its response if South Korea takes steps causing irreversible deterioration of relations. The Russian authorities should abide by the principle of proportionate response, explaining to Seoul their position on key issues (primarily regarding red lines, the crossing of which can aggravate bilateral

relations), refraining from any steps that can deepen the divisions, especially in the economic and humanitarian areas.

It is equally important to understand what should not be done, because zealous officials can easily report progress in closing all programs supported by the Korea Foundation or the Academy of Korean Studies, and labeling all advocates of Russian-South Korean ties as foreign agents or equating K-pop to LGBT propaganda. The general attitude towards South Korea should be in line with President Putin's statements at the Valdai Discussion Club meetings (Interfax, 2022), where he emphasized the good relations between the countries and the fact that any steps on the part of Russia that could worsen them should only be retaliatory.

- Russia must show understanding of the reasons that prompt Seoul to pursue its policy, but at the same time emphasize that Moscow attaches importance not only to how much South Korea supports anti-Russian sanctions but also to the very fact of such support. This should be accompanied by calls urging South Korea to carry out a policy that is more consistent with its own national interests.
- Until Seoul crosses a certain red line, Russia should not obstruct bilateral economic and cultural contacts with it. It is important to understand that South Korea has joined the economic pressure on Russia because there is no way of escaping it. However, many Korean companies try to stay in the Russian market as long as possible, so as not to give it to Chinese competitors. Although bilateral trade turnover sagged in 2022, a sharp increase in trade between South Korea and Russia's neighbors may indicate that it is exploring "parallel export" routes.
- Russia must persistently explain what steps on the part of Seoul would be regarded as the crossing of red lines. If this happens under U.S. pressure, some Russian government officials may be tempted to "take revenge" by putting pressure on South Korean companies in Russia (we can recall Beijing's measures against Lotte's businesses in China after Seoul's decision to deploy American missile defense systems in the country). However,

such steps are counterproductive, unless they are caused by strong evidence of hostile actions against Russia by South Korean companies.

- Russia's sanctions should be "smart" and directed not against South Korea in general, but specifically against certain entities or individuals whose statements or actions aggravate relations between the two countries. Russia should not complicate the rules of economic cooperation or diplomatic activities without urgent need.
- Scientific exchanges between the two countries have already decreased since the start of the special military operation. We should refrain from demonstrative steps that could completely ruin humanitarian contacts and public diplomacy achievements.
- It is necessary to raise the level of awareness about the historical aspects of relations between Russia and South Korea and debunk anti-Russian myths, as representatives of the Korean Studies Center of the Institute of China and Contemporary Asia of the Russian Academy of Sciences have been doing on the Znanie platform (see: Kim Yong Un, 2022; Asmolov, 2022).
- Russia's response to the documented evidence proving South Korean arms supplies to Ukraine should depend on the level of the South Korean leadership's involvement in these operations (a decision to supply weapons can be made without official Seoul's knowledge).
- In assessing the prospects for Seoul's foreign policy behavior, Russia should avoid the false "pro-American right—anti-American left" dichotomy and stop hoping for a change in South Korea's position after a new president takes office. After all, even President Moon Jae-in, who spoke in favor of developing relations with Russia and praised Vladimir Putin in Vladivostok in September 2017, failed to achieve a radical breakthrough on the "northern track."
- We should not forget that the South Korean leadership has always been very sensitive to Russia's relations with North Korea. And if they improve, the importance of Russia for Seoul

will increase, and it will have one more reason for concern about Pyongyang's getting another powerful ally.

So a rapidly changing world is creating new challenges and opportunities for Russia's interaction with the two Koreas. Developing a practical plan of interaction with North Korea and South Korea is actually a more challenging task than it seems at first glance. Since the beginning of the 21st century, the two countries have come to be associated in Russian society as the "good" South and the "bad" North. This dichotomy has been undergoing a significant transformation since 2022, sometimes making U-turns. However, replacing one cliché with another will not help work out an effective long-term policy, the need for which is becoming increasingly urgent.

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