

## The Revival of Russia's Role on the Korean Peninsula

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*The death of North Korean leader Kim Jong-il in 2011 presents Russian president Vladimir Putin with an opportunity to regain influence on the Korean peninsula. Over the long term, Russia may reemerge as a great power in the Asia Pacific region in line with Russian geostrategic interests. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia has been marginalized on major issues in Northeast Asia. The prospect of a consistent, long-term North Korea policy under Putin places Moscow in a strong position to sustain the process of engagement with North Korea. More significantly, it serves Moscow's demographic, economic, and security interests to be a positive influence in the region in order to regain a diplomatic role in any security initiatives concerning the Korean peninsula. In this article, we argue that if and when the Russian Far East is developed, Moscow would be in a position to offset the regional strategic and economic dominance of the United States and China. KEYWORDS: Russia, North Korea, Eurasianism, Russian Far East, counterbalance, China, United States.*

THE DEATH OF KIM JONG-IL IN DECEMBER 2011 PLACES THE NORTH-east Asian region at a crossroads, presenting Russian president Vladimir Putin with an opportunity to restore Russia's influence on the Korean peninsula. In the days that followed Kim's death, speculation was widespread over the extent to which his son and successor, Kim Jong-un, would be able to consolidate power in North Korea. Given the youth and political inexperience of the younger Kim, some analysts feared that the vice chairman of the National Defense Commission (NDC), General Jang Song-thaek, would usurp power from Kim Jong-un. Equally, given the Democratic People's Republic of Korea's (DPRK) past record of belligerent behavior, there were concerns that an unstable succession there would result in episodes similar to the sinking of the Repub-

lic of Korea (ROK) corvette *Cheonan* and the bombardment of Yeongpyong Island in 2010.

Yet, in direct contrast to these concerns, in the months following Kim Jong-un's succession Pyongyang sent mixed signals. On the one hand it resumed talks in Beijing with the US special representative for North Korean policy, Glyn Davies. These talks resulted in the Leap Year Agreement of February 29, 2012, in which the DPRK conceded to suspend nuclear activity under International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspection in exchange for food aid. But the agreement was followed by Pyongyang's failed test of its *Kwangmyongsong* satellite in mid-April ("UN 'Deplores' North Korea Botched Rocket Launch" 2012). Since the *Kwangmyongsong* incorporated dual-use technology derived from the *Taepodong* missile,<sup>1</sup> the launch fueled regional concerns that the DPRK had no intention of ending its missile and nuclear weapon programs ("Project Paperclip: Dark Side of the Moon" 2005). The DPRK's conflicting signals resulted in a renewed impasse in the Six Party Talks, reflected in the Obama administration's decision to nullify the Leap Year Agreement and suspend humanitarian aid to Pyongyang ("US Suspends Plans for Food Aid to North Korea" 2012).

Of considerable importance is that leadership transitions have occurred or are pending in three other key members of the Six Party Talks—namely, China, the Republic of Korea (ROK), and the United States.<sup>2</sup> The reelection of Barack Obama promises continuity in US policy, whereas South Korea's next presidential election may well produce a change in policy toward North Korea. In China, new leadership under Xi Jinping quickly led to a reaffirmation of ties with the DPRK when a high-level Chinese delegation met with Kim Jong-un in November 2012.

Seen in this context, Moscow's interest may rise in regaining a diplomatic foothold in any security initiatives concerning the Korean peninsula. More importantly, a stabilized Northeast Asia would be an environment conducive to foreign investment that would contribute to the economic development of the Russian Far East. Finally, if and when the Russian Far East is developed, Moscow would be in a position to act as a counterbalance against the regional strategic and economic dominance of the United States and China.

We develop this argument in four sections, beginning with a brief examination of the historical background of Russian/Soviet interests and influence on the Korean peninsula, including the collapse of the Soviet Union that diminished Moscow's influence. We then examine the factors that indicate Russia's reemergence as a superpower in international relations, with an apparent interest in projecting power into the Asia Pacific region. The following section explores in depth the demographic, economic, and security rationales for Russia's plan to exercise superpower influence in Northeast Asia and specifically on the Korean peninsula. Finally, we examine the implications of Russia's renewed role in the region.

## **Russia's Historical Interests in Northeast Asia**

### *The Years of Decline as a Superpower*

Russia has had a significant geostrategic interest in the Northeast Asian region that dates back to czarist times. In spite of Russia's vast geographical size, much of the country is icebound, thereby limiting access to the open sea and restricting avenues for maritime commerce (Kramer 2011). Moreover, Russia's few warm-water ports are also constrained by geopolitical boundaries in Europe and the Middle East. For instance, although the port of Sevastopol is ice-free, Russia's ability to use the Black Sea as a basis for power projection is limited by the fact that the only sea route in and out of the Black Sea is controlled by Turkey, while access from the Baltic Sea to the north Atlantic Ocean is constrained by Denmark and Germany. Further confining Russia's historical efforts at increasing access to the open sea has been its contention with major imperial rivals on its western borders, most notably during the Crimean War in 1853–1856 when Britain and France assisted the Ottoman Empire in resisting Russian expansion. During the Second Opium War, Russian mediation efforts resulted in gaining the territory upon which Vladivostok in the Russian Far East was founded in 1860. Yet, given the extent to which Vladivostok's access to the open sea remains limited by the

geographical location of the Korean peninsula and Japan, Russia's ambitions to become a strong maritime power remained unfulfilled even after the founding of Vladivostok.

Although Russia's geopolitical interests in the Northeast Asian region went briefly into decline during the first half of the twentieth century due to World Wars I and II and the Russian Revolution, they resurfaced during the Cold War. Soviet material support for the DPRK during the Korean War was followed by the signing of the Soviet–North Korean treaty of 1961, which pledged Soviet military support for Pyongyang in the event of a renewal of hostilities on the Korean peninsula (Kwak 1996). This was followed by yet another decline in Russian influence in Northeast Asia under Mikhail Gorbachev during the late 1980s. As a result of Gorbachev's preoccupation with domestic reforms (*glasnost* and *perestroika*), Moscow placed increasing importance on establishing diplomatic and commercial relations with South Korea in 1991 at the expense of its relations with Pyongyang (Bazhanov and Bazhanov 1994). But those years also saw the political and territorial disintegration of the USSR, alongside severe economic dislocation in the form of high structural unemployment and inflation that demolished Russia's reputation as a superpower (Platkovskiy 2000).

Russia's post-Soviet decline as a superpower was further evident in the extent to which President Boris Yeltsin was forced to establish relations with the liberal democracies in order to facilitate Moscow's turbulent political and economic transition (Bazhanov 1999). Thereafter, Moscow experienced security and diplomatic humiliations in its traditional sphere of influence in Europe. Russia was diplomatically and militarily impotent in the face of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO) use of airpower against Serbia, Moscow's erstwhile client state in the Balkans, in 1995 and 1999. Equally humbling was the fact that, in spite of its overwhelming conventional force superiority, Russia was unable to effectively suppress the separatist movement in Chechnya in 1995. Further adding insult to injury was the Clinton administration's plan to implement the National Missile Defense (NMD) program (Cerniello 1999). This aroused Russia's fears that the United States sought to abrogate the Anti-Ballistic Missile

(ABM) Treaty that had been a stabilizing factor in Russian-US relations. The US-led military intervention in Kosovo in 1999 further underlined the extent to which Washington's post-Cold War unipolarity had evolved at the expense of Russian political and security interests, even in its traditional sphere of influence in Eastern Europe.

The extent of Russian post-Cold War impotence was underscored yet again when the George W. Bush administration unilaterally abrogated the ABM Treaty and moved ahead on development of an NMD system. Moscow's nuclear arsenal, the cornerstone of its deterrence, was eroded. The US follow-up to development of NMD was Theater Missile Defense (TMD), which included deployment of interceptor missiles in Poland and the Czech Republic—both NATO members that had previously been part of the Soviet sphere of influence (Burns 2007). Russian anger over this encroachment into Central Europe was evident on July 14, 2007, when Moscow gave notice of its intention to withdraw from the Conventional Forces in Europe Treaty that had brought stability to Europe during the late 1980s ("Russia Suspends Arms Control Pact" 2007). Equally serious was Russia's decision in August the following year to suspend military ties with NATO ("Norway, Russia to Freeze NATO Military Ties" 2008; Rozman 2010).

The extent of NATO expansion and US encroachment into traditional Russian spheres of influence simultaneously highlighted the failure of what commentators have referred to as the Primakov Doctrine. As advocated by Foreign Minister Yevgeniy Primakov in 1996, the doctrine envisaged a Russian foreign policy based on mediation to expand influence in the Middle East and the former Soviet republics. It represented a bid to constrain the United States through a multilateral Russian approach to world affairs ("War in the Balkans" 1999).

### *Russian Eurasianism*

Russia's identity as a great power is intricately tied to the concept of Eurasianism, first outlined as a political philosophy by Nikolai Trubetskoi and Pyotr Savitsky during the 1920s, and more

recently by Vadim Tsymburskii (Shlapentokh 2005). Eurasianist geostrategic theory is based on Russia's spanning of both Europe and Asia, a feature that has led successive Russian leaders since the czarist era to perceive Russia as an imperialist power in both regions. As noted by Paradorn Rangsimaporn, Russia's unique geography has meant that it is not a traditional European or Asian power, but rather a Eurasianist one, allowing Russian leaders to justify having an active voice in the affairs of both regions (Rangsimaporn 2006). More recently, this Russian self-perception was revived by Vladimir Putin who, as prime minister in October 2011, announced his support for a "Eurasian Union" to encompass the entire former USSR. This union, he said, could become "one of the poles of the modern world, serving as an efficient link between Europe and the dynamic Asia-Pacific region" (Mazower 2011). Putin also advocated an "East Asian Concert of Powers" to promote Russian cooperation not only with the United States, but also China and Japan (Rangsimaporn 2009).

To accomplish Putin's purposes will, however, require that Moscow overcome its diplomatic impotence in Northeast Asia during the 1990s. As mentioned above, the Soviet Union had been one of the primary superpower patrons of North Korea during the Cold War, but the subsequent collapse of Russia's superpower status effectively sidelined Moscow from Northeast Asian affairs (Moltz 1999). Moscow's normalization of relations with Seoul in 1990 and the termination of its arms supplies to the DPRK further marginalized Russia's influence on Pyongyang (Rozman 2010). Russia's economic turbulence also led it to insist on payment in hard cash for military aid—no easy feat for the cash-strapped Pyongyang regime (Yang, Kim, and Kim 2004). Furthermore, North Korea's noncompliance with the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) and the resulting 1993–1994 nuclear crisis increasingly convinced Moscow that the government in Pyongyang was a diplomatic liability at best, and a source of regional instability at worst. This attitude was reflected in Moscow's threat to support sanctions against the DPRK during the crisis (Bazhanov and Bazhanov 1994).

Equally humiliating for Moscow was the extent to which the United States effectively sidelined Moscow's role in Northeast

Asia in the post–Cold War period. The Clinton administration, for instance, deliberately excluded post-Soviet Russia from involvement in the Four Party Talks on Korea from 1997 to 1998 (Moltz 1999). During Putin’s first presidency between 2000 and 2004, he expressed considerable interest in Korean peninsula affairs, but this was not acknowledged by other major parties. Following the news that the DPRK had undertaken a clandestine highly enriched uranium (HEU) program in 2002, for instance, the George W. Bush administration initially sought to exclude Russia from participating in a multilateral framework for dealing with North Korea’s nuclear program (Pritchard 2007).

### **Russia’s Opportunity for Superpower Status in Northeast Asia**

#### *Promoting Diplomacy via North Korea*

Against this background of constraints on Russian influence but also shifting circumstances on the Korean peninsula, it appears that Vladimir Putin now identifies the Northeast Asian region as a geostrategic opportunity for regaining Russia’s superpower status. Putin’s outlook was initially evident during his first term as president in May 2000, when he adopted a pragmatic North Korea policy that corresponded directly with his objectives of promoting Russia’s geopolitical and economic interests on the Korean peninsula while demonstrating to the international community the reemergence of Russia as an influential world power (Takeda 2006). Just weeks after the inter-Korean summit in June 2000 between Kim Jong-il and South Korea president Kim Dae-jung, Putin visited Pyongyang. His talks with Kim Jong-il culminated in the DPRK–Russia Joint Declaration of July 20, 2000 (Joo 2007). A close examination of the document suggests a subtle bandwagging between Moscow and Pyongyang; it included repeated references to “multilateral cooperation” and a “multipolar world,” and it affirmed DPRK and Russian shared interests in “global stability and security against all the policies of aggression and war.” The joint declaration also stated a “willingness to get in touch

with each other without delay if the danger of aggression to the DPRK or to Russia is created or when there is the need to have consultations and cooperate with each other under the circumstances where peace and security are threatened.” Pyongyang and Moscow also declared “their commitment neither to sign with a third country any treaties and agreements detrimental to the sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of the other party” (“DPRK-Russia Joint Declaration Released” 2000).

Although the DPRK-Russia Joint Declaration of 2000 did not make any reference to a common rival, the declaration’s numerous references to a “multipolar world” clearly aimed at drawing a contrast with the unipolar worldview attributed to US leaders. If anything, the joint declaration’s repeated emphasis on promoting diplomatic and security cooperation suggests that Pyongyang and Moscow had both adopted diplomacy as the main response to their perception of the United States as a security and political challenge. While President Clinton’s appointment of former defense secretary William Perry to lead a review of US policy toward North Korea in 1999 had resulted in Washington’s lifting of sanctions on the DPRK, the North Korean leadership remained uncertain of the prospects for an improvement in its relations with Washington. Given that the United States was to hold a presidential election in 2000, the North Korean leadership was doubtless aware that the US election meant having to deal with a new administration in Washington. Since we know that North Korea’s interest in an HEU program dated back to this same period, it is also likely that Pyongyang sought to hedge against the possibility that the new US leadership might have less interest in the continued implementation of the Geneva Agreed Framework of 1994, which promised (among other things) US help for North Korea’s construction of a light-water reactor.

In short, an imminent presidential transition in Washington meant that the North Korean leadership may have seen in Putin an honest broker through whom Pyongyang could avoid being left in the lurch if people in the United States elected a Republican president hostile to North Korea. In this regard, it is notable that Putin’s talks in Pyongyang in 2000 were followed by the Russia-DPRK Summit of August 2001. During those meetings, Deputy

Foreign Minister Alexander Losyukov offered to supply Pyongyang with Russian-built power plants to offset the DPRK's energy shortfalls (Funabashi 2007). The idea was in recognition that Washington had dragged its feet in implementing the light-water reactor project. As noted by the Korea Research Institute for Strategy in its 2002 annual report, Putin's "aggressive attempts to normalize relations with North Korea bespeaks a pragmatic line of policy aimed at securing a diplomatic breakthrough not only on the Korean Peninsula but also in Northeast Asia as a whole" (Korea Research Institute for Strategy 2002, 264). Thus, it seems that Putin saw the Korean peninsula as a potential opportunity for Russia to exercise great power influence while simultaneously counterbalancing US dominance (Zabrovskaya 1999).

### *Seeking to Become a "Rich and Civilized" Country*

The notion that Putin sought a revival of Russia's superpower status during his first term as president is strengthened by his declaration, at the time of his inauguration in May 2000, that his goal was "to turn Russia into a free, prosperous, rich, strong and civilized country, a country of which its citizens are proud and which is respected in the world" ("Putin's Inauguration Speech" 2000). Putin's aspiration was probably based on practical calculations of the variables that constitute Russian power; rather than take on the political and economic strength of the European Union, it appears that Putin chose instead to maximize Russia's influence in Northeast Asia.

Putin's agenda also has a nationalist component, as can be seen in his inaugural speech as president of Russia on May 7, 2000. He hailed the way Moscow had "strengthened our country and returned our dignity as a great nation. The world has seen a Russia risen anew, [with] a solid economic and social foundation" (Office of the Kremlin 2000). At the same time, and recognizing Russia's opportunity to raise its international profile in line with its reemergence as a great power in world affairs, Putin foresaw

a new stage in our national development that requires us to resolve tasks at a principally new level . . . [with] our determination in de-

veloping our vast expanses from the Baltic to the Pacific, and on our ability to become a leader and centre of gravity for the whole of Eurasia. . . . We are ready for the tests and accomplishments ahead. Russia has a great past and just as great a future. (Office of the Kremlin 2012)

Putin views his role in Russia as fulfilling the historical pattern of strong, authoritarian leadership that had previously governed the nation during the czarist and communist eras. He believes that the historical place of Russia is as a great power with a consistent “policy of strengthening the world’s security . . . it was our country that took upon itself the main strike by the Nazis [during World War II]” (Loika 2012). As Alexander Rahr of the German Council on Foreign Relations noted, Putin “is caught in the understanding that he is the savior of Russia, that everything depends on him . . . He sees himself as a historical figure already, a man who prevented the collapse of the country” (Barry and Kishkovsky 2012). By invoking Russia’s central position in World War II, Putin’s inaugural speech (delivered on the sixty-seventh anniversary of the Red Army’s victory over Nazi Germany) was, in effect, a declaration of his ambition to return Russia to the superpower status that it enjoyed after 1945 but lost with the collapse of the USSR.

Importantly, Putin’s speech underlined his vision of Russia as a “Eurasian power” rather than a European power as in the past. He probably views the Northeast Asia region in geopolitical terms, as the convergence of great-power interests, thereby putting Moscow in a strong position to widen its influence. This perspective is strengthened by a number of events. Since 2001 Russia has been identified by Goldman Sachs economist James O’Neill as one of the BRICs, standing alongside Brazil, India, and China as the countries that are poised to dominate the global economy by 2027. Russia’s entry into the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2011 also affords significant opportunities in the Northeast Asian region, as did Vladivostok’s hosting of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Summit in September 2012 (Block 2011). Although Russia had neglected its own Far East

during the 1990s, leading to significant disparities in regional income distribution, the present moment stands as an ideal opportunity for Russia to exert economic and commercial influence in the Northeast Asian region (Parfitt 2011).

As noted by the World Bank, the location of the Russian Far East amid the twenty-one member countries of APEC, with their combined population of 2.5 billion and an aggregate gross domestic product of \$19 trillion, places Russia in a strong position (“Russian Far East” n.d.). Vladivostok has symbolic importance here. Founded to consolidate czarist expansion in the Russian Far East, Vladivostok is the primary geostrategic location for Russia to project its great power profile in the Asia Pacific. Moreover, given that this was the first time Russia had hosted the APEC Summit, 2012 marked the growing recognition of Russia’s return as a great power following the chaos of the postcommunist era.

## **Multiple Russian Interests in Northeast Asian Stability**

### *Demographic Pressures*

We may now better define Russia’s demographic, economic, and security interests in ensuring the stability of the Korean peninsula. The first of these stems from the demographic trends faced by the Russian Federation. In spite of the aforementioned economic rebirth of Russia, another social trend has continued from the 1990s, namely, a population in decline. Although Russia’s economy has rebounded since 2000, the birth rate has declined. Post-Soviet increases in alcoholism and drug abuse have contributed to a growing male mortality rate, which, combined with an average life expectancy of 66.6 years, led P. L. Dash to forecast the possibility of a male-to-female ratio of 40:100 by the mid-twenty-first century (“Russian Far East” n.d.; Dash 2001). At the time of the breakup of the Soviet Union, the population of the Russian Far East was estimated at 8 million; by 2009 it had declined to an estimated 6.4 million (Goskomstat/Rosstat 1991–2009). Although the inverse relation between economic growth and population growth

is well known, the birth rate among educated women in Russia remains high, in direct contrast to developed countries with low birth rates (Kumo 2010).

Moreover, statistics from the Russia Longitudinal Monitoring Survey indicate that an overall low-level satisfaction of life appears to be taking root among large numbers of women in the Russian Far East, leading to a declining birth rate. In particular, these statistics emphasize that dissatisfaction with household income is the primary variable that has led to low birth rates in the Russian Far East (Kumo 2010). The uneven level of economic development there has exacerbated the problem, causing increasing transmigration in the form of educated Russians in the Far East seeking improved job prospects in European Russia (Kuhrt 2012). Thus, in September 2008, President Dmitry Medvedev warned that “if we do not step up the level of activity of our work [in the Russian Far East], then in the final analysis we can lose everything”—a comment that underlined the danger of Russia losing economic influence within its borders to increased economic competition from China (Goble 2008).

This trend presents Russia with a demographic predicament. Given the already small population of the Russian Far East (as opposed to urban centers in European Russia due to the aforementioned migration trends), Moscow is concerned about the ever-increasing prospect of Chinese immigration into the region. The long and porous Sino-Russian border and Russia's past territorial disputes with China lie in the background. Russian leaders are therefore anxious to ensure some level of control over the demographic balance in the Far East. With the continued deterioration of the DPRK's economy and the increasing incidence of famine there since the 1990s, a collapse of the Pyongyang regime is likely to lead to an exodus of North Korean refugees into China and Russia (Becker 2005; “Medvedev Concerned by Falling Population” 2010). Although most North Korean refugees who would flee in case of a collapse of the DPRK would head for China, due to China's longer border with the DPRK, the comparatively small population of the Russian Far East would mean that Russia would have even greater difficulties than China in safeguarding its borders or coping with an influx of refugees (Brooke 2005).

Contributing to the DPRK's stability is therefore in Russia's demographic interest. Although President Medvedev had sought to respond to this changing demographic balance by encouraging Russian transmigration into the Russian Far East, this measure proved rather unpopular and unworkable due to the reluctance of most urban Russians to uproot themselves and settle down in such an isolated, underdeveloped part of the country. Consequently, there are grounds to argue that encouraging and controlling labor migration from the DPRK would be advantageous to both Moscow and Pyongyang. Such an arrangement is not without precedent; as early as 1995 Moscow and Pyongyang had signed an agreement allowing 15,000 to 20,000 North Korean workers to work for Russian logging companies to pay off the DPRK's debts to Russia (Haggard and Noland 2007). More recently, on April 27, 2012, North Korean leader Kim Jong-un reportedly issued an order to send as many workers as possible abroad to earn hard currency ("More North Korean Workers" 2012). In the Amur region alone, Russian lumber companies have hired an estimated 1,500 North Koreans, and evidence indicates that Russian timber and other companies in the Russian Far East continue to show interest in hiring more North Korean workers ("North Koreans Toiling" 2009). Given Putin's proposal to undertake further investment and economic development of the Russian Far East, such a prospect would doubtless appeal to both sides. An increased pool of inexpensive North Korean labor would enable Moscow to fulfill its ambitions in developing the Russian Far East while simultaneously counterbalancing excessive Chinese immigration. At the same time, the importation of labor from North Korea would also allow Pyongyang to gain much-needed foreign exchange earnings that would contribute to the DPRK's efforts at economic reform and hence long-term regime survival (Scalapino 2001).

### *Economic Interests*

Even assuming that the DPRK does not collapse, Russia also has economic interests in Northeast Asia. Although a comparison of Chinese and Soviet/Russian economic reform has juxtaposed the success of Deng Xiaoping's gradualist approach with the collapse

of the USSR that followed Gorbachev's perestroika, Russia's position in 2012 stands in marked contrast to the chaos of the 1990s. As early as the 1990s, Russia had identified its border with the DPRK as an opportunity for free trade, leading to the formation of the Rajin-Sonbong Special Economic Zone in North Korea. Successful exploitation of the Russian Far East border region with North Korea is consistent with Putin's ambitions to raise Russia's status as a world power. On January 30, 2012, Putin, in his capacity as prime minister, announced plans for Moscow to "support large infrastructure projects, [especially] transportation networks and reliable communication with Siberia and Russia's Far East" (Office of the Prime Minister of the Russian Federation 2012). Given the extent of Russia's planned restructuring of its economy toward scientific research and development, the vast expanse of territory in the Russian Far East offers significant potential for industrial development that is expected to lead to a snowballing effect of increasing interest on the part of foreign investors. This is further supported by Putin's ambition to diversify the Russian economy from being resource-based and dependent on oil and gas to one that incorporates a strong tertiary industry sector ("Russia Must Speed Up Economic Diversification" 2011). Successful exploitation of DPRK-Russian trade, estimated at a mere \$110 million in 2010, is of significant interest to Moscow ("North Korea" 2012).

Moreover, since Russia shares only a seventeen-kilometer border with North Korea along the Tumen River as well as limited ice-free access to the East Sea (also known as the Sea of Japan), Moscow also has an interest in consolidating access to the Rajin-Sonbong Economic Special Zone and North Korean port facilities. Much of North Korea's road and rail network and its factories were designed and built with Soviet assistance, putting Russia in a strong position to rebuild and upgrade the DPRK's existing infrastructure while ensuring interoperability with the DPRK's factories (Ferguson 2003). Russia also stands to gain from the economic rehabilitation of North Korea. As early as 2001 Moscow had indicated its interest in building an "Iron Silk Road" to connect the Trans-Siberian Railway to the Trans-Korean Railway via the town of Khasan. The project would have facilitated

the inexpensive transportation of manufactured goods from South Korea and Japan through Russia to export markets in Western Europe (Funabashi 2007).

In light of China's own plans to expand its railroad infrastructure, Russia has reason to compete with Beijing in the construction and expansion of railway links to the DPRK. On April 2, 2012, Moscow and Pyongyang announced the commencement of a cross-border cargo freight service that would begin in October. It will be constructed as part of the infrastructure expansion linking the Russian border town of Khasan to the Rajin-Sonbong Economic Special Zone. Both sides anticipate that successful completion of this railway link will lead to rail freight capacity estimated at 100,000 shipping containers per year ("Russia and North Korea" 2012).

Furthermore, the growing energy shortages faced by China, both Koreas, and Japan make it likely that Russia views the Northeast Asian region as an ideal export market for the supply of natural gas and other energy sources. This consideration is further underpinned by Moscow's occasional tensions with (and hence, the export market unreliability of) its European neighbors, in contrast to which Russia has generally good relations with the states of the Northeast Asian region (Vatansever 2010). Russian interest in tapping the Northeast Asian region as an energy export market was reflected in the energy giant Gazprom's proposal in December 2011 to provide \$3 billion to finance construction of a 700-kilometer gas pipeline from the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) that separates the two Koreas to the Russian border with the DPRK ("The Russian Energy Outlook" 2011; "The Return of President Putin" 2012). This proposal was in line with President Medvedev's offer in August 2011 to restructure the DPRK's \$11 billion debt to Moscow ("Russia: North Korea Ready" 2011).

With just 4 percent of Russia's population in Asiatic Russia, the undeveloped infrastructure of the Russian Far East has massive untapped economic potential that presents Moscow with a dual predicament (Demographic Yearbook of Russia 2010). On one hand, the underpopulated Russian Far East is facing difficulties in acquiring sufficient labor for economic development; on the other hand, Russia is also anxious to control the rate of human movement from Asian countries into the Russian Far East

(Zabrovskaya 1999). Although Chinese migrant labor in the Russian Far East has long been an important aspect of the region's economic exploitation, traditional Russian suspicion and reluctance to overrely on China remain. Russians still recall that significant portions of the Russian Far East were formerly Chinese territory prior to Russia's annexation of the Amur region in 1858–1860 (Collins 2011). Nor does Russia have an interest in witnessing an inflow of starving North Korean refugees, as noted earlier. Thus, Moscow views North Korea as a potential source of inexpensive labor that simultaneously counterbalances Chinese immigration into the Russian Far East (Kuhrt 2012). Conversely, a denuclearized North Korea would promote a stable political environment that would be conducive to attracting foreign investment and enable Moscow to exploit the previously untapped, resource-rich Russian Far East.

### *The Security Dimension*

The implications for Russia's regional security interests arising from the prospect of a nuclear-armed North Korea are of great importance. Moscow has two reasons to be concerned about the DPRK's nuclear ambitions. The first stems from the possibility of a nuclear arms race. Although the 2006 and 2009 North Korean nuclear weapons tests did not result in a regional arms race, assuming that the Northeast Asian region does not face that prospect would be naive. Rather, as noted by Ken Booth and Nicholas J. Wheeler, the Northeast Asian region is particularly prone to what they refer to as a "security dilemma contagion," a situation in which the military ambitions of one state may feed the security fears of neighboring countries, leading to a regional arms race (Booth and Wheeler 2008).

The nonnuclear weapons status of South Korea and Japan is hedged on the continued credibility of the US nuclear umbrella over Seoul and Tokyo. During the 1970s, in response to growing fears that Washington sought to downsize its military presence in Northeast Asia, South Korea attempted to develop a clandestine nuclear weapons program to cope with the possibility of a conflict with North Korea without that umbrella (Harrison 2002). In a similar vein, Japan's apparent adherence to the Three Non-

Nuclear Principles of 1968 should not be seen as an unqualified rejection of its right to develop nuclear weapons. As noted by Selig Harrison, prior to passing the 1968 resolution, Japanese prime minister Sato Eisaku had commissioned a secret government review to study the feasibility of developing an independent Japanese nuclear arsenal. Sato's decision not to pursue that idea was contingent on the continuation of the US security commitment to Japan (Harrison 2002). Long-standing grievances over Japan's occupation of China and the Korean peninsula increase the risk that an independent Japanese nuclear weapons program would lead to a regional nuclear arms race. Washington's ongoing efforts to develop the NMD plan add to the risk since the plan, if fully implemented, would enhance US nuclear superiority over Russia's smaller, less sophisticated nuclear arsenal. Since the threat of a North Korean nuclear missile strike against the United States is the primary scenario of concern to missile-defense advocates in Washington, it is also in Moscow's interests to rein in the DPRK's nuclear ambitions, lest an Asia Pacific arms race result that culminates in a second cold war in the region.

The second major security concern for the Russian government arising from the DPRK's nuclear program stems from the possibility that North Korea will implode due to its growing social and economic strains. A DPRK collapse would increase the likelihood that its nuclear weapons-grade material would end up on the black market, available to transnational criminal organizations as well as terrorist networks (Quinlan 2009). The terrorist threat to Russia would increase from Chechen separatists who have carried out bomb attacks in Moscow, such as from an improvised radiological device exploding in a Russian city. It is therefore in Russia's interests to ensure that Pyongyang's access to nuclear material is curbed and controlled in line with the nuclear nonproliferation regime.

## **Conclusion**

Russia is in a strong position to promote itself as a regional power in the Asia Pacific while simultaneously contributing to the process of engagement with the DPRK. The year 2012 was an

election year in Seoul, holding the prospect of a leadership transition. Although the conservative Saenuri party won the 2012 parliamentary elections in Seoul, there is increasing voter disinterest, in particular on North Korean issues, which suggests that the outcome of this year's presidential election remains to be seen. In turn, regardless of which party wins this year's presidential elections in South Korea, domestic politics is likely to be the primary focus of the new South Korean administration next year ("Saenuri's New Leadership" 2012).

An equal level of uncertainty stems from the forthcoming US presidential elections. Growing public disillusionment in the United States over the slow pace of economic recovery, excessive government spending, and the high level of unemployment created the strong possibility of a backlash against Barack Obama's bid for reelection. The hawkish foreign policy and national security positions of the Republican Party meant that had Mitt Romney emerged victorious, a coercive diplomacy and halfhearted engagement with the DPRK would have been likely, culminating in continued stalling of the Six Party Talks. Even though Obama won, the multiple domestic and international challenges he faces make it likely that he will be hamstrung by congressional critics ("Beware Lame-duck Obama" 2012). Obama will probably not be very enthusiastic either about reviving the Six Party Talks.

These factors suggest that the reelection of Putin as Russia's president places him in a strong position to sustain and promote the process of engagement with the DPRK over the long term. The six-year term of the Russian presidency means that Moscow is well placed to ensure a certain level of continuity in government policy toward North Korea (as opposed to the four- and five-year terms of the US and ROK presidencies, respectively) and to play the role of an honest broker. The necessity of that role in assuaging the DPRK's fears of diplomatic isolation is arguably reflected by the influence of China during the fourth and fifth rounds of the Six Party Talks in September 2005 and February 2007, respectively. At that time Beijing was crucial in mediating between Washington and Pyongyang and enabling agreement on the Joint Statements of September 2005 and the February 13, 2007, Agreement (Funabashi 2007). At the same

time, however, given that the Six Party Talks have not made any progress since 2008, it may be argued that having a second honest broker, in the form of Russia, may provide the DPRK with sufficient assurance that Pyongyang's interests will not be neglected in the Six Party Talks.

In short, Moscow can function as a diplomatic counterbalance between the United States and China in engaging the DPRK, which also ensures that the DPRK will not have to be overly dependent on China. Moreover, an increased level of engagement with North Korea through the medium of the Six Party Talks would provide Russia with opportunities to exploit the potential to develop the Russian Far East, which serves the interests of both sides. Engagement with North Korea would also ensure tighter control over the movement of refugees across the border, thereby safeguarding Moscow's demographic interests in the Russian Far East. Putin's second presidency may therefore be seen as a turning point in Russia's great power profile in the Asia Pacific region. Since he is eligible for reelection in 2018, the possibility of a consistent Russian policy toward North Korea over a period of twelve years may result in Russia playing a greater role in contributing to the stability of the Korean peninsula.

## Notes

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1. The US and Soviet space rocket programs benefited from German application of rocket technology in the design of the V2 flying bomb, the world's first ballistic missile, during World War II.

2. Although Japan is also a member of the Six Party Talks, Tokyo's

focus on the issue of Japanese abducted by the DPRK has resulted in its having limited influence on the talks.

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