



Yearbook of the Institute of East-Central Europe (Rocznik Instytutu Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej)

Publication details, including instructions for authors:
<http://www.iesw.lublin.pl/rocznik/index.php>

ISSN 1732-1395

Russian Federation relations with South and North Korea and its role in the reunification of the peninsula – scenarios for the future

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Published online: 10 Dec 2018

To cite this article: Katarzyna Pisarska, 'Russian Federation relations with South and North Korea and its role in the reunification of the peninsula – scenarios for the future', *Yearbook of the Institute of East-Central Europe*, Vol. 16, No. 4, 2018, pp. 87-106.

Yearbook of the Institute of East-Central Europe (Rocznik Instytutu Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej) is a quarterly, published in Polish and in English, listed in the European Reference Index for the Humanities and Social Sciences (ERIH PLUS), Central and Eastern European Online Library (CEEOL), BazEkon and IC Journal Master List (Index Copernicus International). In the most recent Ministry of Science and Higher Education ranking of journals published on the Polish market the Yearbook of the Institute of East-Central Europe received one of the highest scores, i.e. 14 points.

Katarzyna Pisarska

Russian Federation relations with South and North Korea and its role in the reunification of the peninsula – scenarios for the future

Abstract: The article examines Russian Federation's relations with both South and North Korea in the years 1991-2018 and tries to make an assessment of the potential role Russia could play in a future reunification process of the peninsula. The author examines three possible scenarios of such a process: a peaceful reunification, a reunification that would result from North Korean regime's collapse or from an all-out war on the peninsula. It is argued that although the Russian Federation might prefer to see the continuation of the current status quo, in case of any potential security environment shift the peaceful reunification scenario will best assure Russia's interest in the region.

Keywords: Russian Federation – Foreign Relations – Korea (South) – Korea (North), Reunification of Korea

Introduction

The Russian Federation's policy towards the neighboring Korean peninsula has been traditionally closely integrated within a global strategic line, which takes into account the specificities of relations with the two Korean States, the international security environment and economic considerations. Russia sees its interests in the Korean Peninsula through the lenses of greater geopolitical interests in Northeast Asia, defined as “securing stability and peace in the region that will create favorable conditions for economic development and reforms in Russian Far East and Russia as a whole”.¹ For this reason Russia's

1 V. Yakubovsky, 'The Future of Korean and Northeast Asia: Russian Concerns', Paper presented at: 4th Europe-Northeast Asia Forum – The Future of Korea and Northeast Asia, Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, 11-13 December 2003, p. 1.

activities in the peninsula have been focusing primarily on assuring strong economic cooperation with South Korea and managing political and security cooperation with North Korea. In the past however, the Russian Federation has not been an active proponent of the reunification of the two states, as it has considered the current *status quo* as the most conducive to its interest. Under President Vladimir Putin's leadership the country has nonetheless gained "gravitas" in the region and is considered, after the U.S. and China, as the third major player on the peninsula – well balancing its relations with both the North and the South.

The aim of the discussion entailed in the following parts of the article is to analyze Russia's state of relations with both South and North Korea in the years 1991-2018, in order to showcase Russia's investment in the region as an important asset and leverage in easing the future rapprochement between the two Koreas. The study will also look at Russia's role in three possible scenarios of such rapprochement: a peaceful reunification, a reunification that would result from North Korean regime's collapse or from an all-out war on the peninsula. It will argue that although the Russian Federation might prefer to see the continuation of the current *status quo*, in case of any potential security environment shift (as we might be currently experiencing under the Trump administration) the peaceful reunification scenario will best assure Russia's interest in the region. Any escalation of conflict, will on the other hand play to the detriment of its strategic interest in Northeast Asia and most probably result in a complete loss of influence in the peninsula.

1. Russia's relations with South Korea

● Throughout the 20th century, the relations between the Soviet Union and South Korea have been largely determined by the legacy of the Korean War of 1950-1953. As a country providing assistance for the North Korea's invasion of South Korea, and later as the Kim regime's security guarantor, the Soviet Union has been for years perceived by the South Korean state as a hostile power. The first signs of normalization of relations came only in the late 1970s and were a direct result of a growing demand from both sides related to the need to assure economic growth through enhanced international trade. The

growing interest in reestablishing relations led to three stages of their development in the years to come. As indicated by Gilbert Rozman these stages were: 1) the Gorbachev era's new thinking and South Korea's search for normalization (1986-1991); 2) Boris Yeltsin's neglect of Northeast Asia and Korea's disregard of Russia (1991-1998); and 3) Vladimir Putin's stress on security in Northeast Asia as South Korea welcomed Russia's growing role in the region (since 2000).² With the annexation of Crimea in 2014, the Russian-Chinese rapprochement and the growing security tensions in Asia, the bilateral relations are however entering a fourth stage characterized by Seoul distrust of Russia's real intentions in the region.

In the 1980s, South Korean President Roh Tae Woo's "Nordpolitik" and Mikhail Gorbachev's "New Thinking" were both attempts to reverse their nations' recent histories. From the Soviet perspective, the move was part of a new opening to Asia in general. As stated by Mikhail Gorbachev in 1986 at Vladivostok and repeated in 1988 at Krasnoyarsk, with the end of the cold war era, the Soviet Union sought opportunities for the development of its Far East as part of a broader Asian-Pacific economy. The Soviet rapprochement logic was somehow in sync with the "Nordpolitik" foreign policy strategy undertaken by Seoul in the 1980s, which encouraged reaching out to the traditional allies of its North Korean foe, in particular to China and the Soviet Union. The normalization process was interrupted by the winds of history, which brought the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.³

The end of the Cold War was both an opportunity and a challenge for Russian-South Korean relations. On the one hand, immediately after the emergence of the Russian Federation in 1991, official diplomatic ties were established and borders were opened for trade. The process of rebuilding trust between the two parties was eased by President Boris Yeltsin renouncing the 1961 Soviet Union treaty with North Korea, which obliged Moscow to offer immediate military aid to DPRK in an

2 G. Rozman, 'South Korean Strategic Thought toward Russia', in: G. Rozman and I. Hyun, S. Lee (eds), *South Korean Strategic Thought toward Asia*, New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008, pp. 203-224.

3 Ibid.

event of war.⁴ On the other hand however, the clear pivot of Moscow towards the West, accompanied by an almost dogmatic disinterest in the Asian dimension of Russian foreign policy, have constrained the development of any significant partnership initiatives. In addition, the Asian and Russian economic crisis of the 1990s have casted a shadow on the earlier optimistic predictions related to bilateral trade.

A significant qualitative change in bilateral relations has not occurred until the election of the new Russian President Vladimir Putin. Putin's foreign policy strategy, based on Evgeny Primakov's concepts of "sustained multipolarity" in international relations, has reinvigorated Russia's engagement in East Asia. As Primakov did, also Vladimir Putin believed that a closer alignment with raising powers (ex. BRICS), would provide Russia with the leverage in its dealing with the West and would support Moscow's efforts to revise some elements of the Western order. The rising price of oil and gas, provided Russia not only with significant financial resources but also with a confidence boost, which was reflected by a growth of its regional aspirations in Northeast Asia.⁵

Under the Putin's presidency the pragmatic cooperation with South Korea developed on two separate levels. On the one side, both parties pushed for enhanced security cooperation, largely through the evolving multilateral institutions designed to help achieve stability in the Korean peninsula. On the other side, Moscow strengthened economic cooperation with both South and North Korea.⁶ Although acknowledging the importance of trade, South Korea was mainly interested in Russia's role in a possible reunification with North Korea, seeing it as a potential mediator in its dealing with Pyongyang. Moscow on the other hand treated South Korea as an important trading partner for its Far-East regions. Among the flagship initiatives was the Trans-Korean Railway (TKR) – a project to build railway infrastructure that

4 S. Radchenko, 'Russia's Policy in the Run-Up to the First North Korean Nuclear Crisis, 1991-1993', *Nuclear Proliferation International History Project Working Paper #4*, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 15 February 2015, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/russias-policy-the-run-to-the-first-north-korean-nuclear-crisis-1991-1993> [2018-08-02].

5 Rozman, op. cit., p. 47.

6 R. Jakimowicz, *Polityka Federacji Rosyjskiej wobec regionu Azji i Pacyfiku, Azji Centralnej i Arktyki* [Russian Federation and its politics towards Asia, Pacific, Central Asia and the Arctic], Kraków, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 2015, p. 209.

would go through North Korea, and allow rail freight to travel between South Korea and Russia.⁷ In 2001, the leaders of Russia and North Korea signed agreements to create a rail corridor to South Korea and in 2008 preliminary construction work officially begun. The idea was revitalized in 2013 by Korean President Park Geun-hye, who called for binding Eurasian nations closely together by linking roads and railways to realize what she called the “Silk Road Express” running from South Korea to Europe via North Korea, Russia and China. President Park also suggested that the world’s biggest continent had the potential to become a huge single market rivaling the European Union, and Russia would also be a part of such regional integration projects.⁸ Three years later however, South Korea suspended the trilateral logistics project with North Korea and Russia, in response to the 2016 DPRK nuclear and missile tests on the peninsula.⁹

Regardless of the trilateral initiatives’ failures, bilateral trade cooperation between Russia and South Korea remains a top priority for both partners.¹⁰ In the years 1992-2012 the overall trade turnover surged over 130 times – from \$190 m to \$22.5 billion – with a relative equilibrium between imports and exports.¹¹ The two economies are quite complementary. Russia has remained attractive for South Korea because of the richness of its mineral and other natural resources. Moscow on the other hand, sees Seoul as an economy opulent in new technologies (space, nuclear energy) and a reliable manufacture of industrial products (cars, mobile phones). However, Russia–South Korea overall trade turnover, accounting for 3.1% of the total volume

- 7 Korean Rail Network Authority, ‘Trans-Korea railway & North Korean rail modernization’, *News*, December 2017, <http://english.kr.or.kr/sub/info.do?m=0203> [2018-06-27].
- 8 Business Korea, ‘Korean President Park Proposes “Silk Road Express” to Connect Eurasian Nations, Facilitate Exchanges’, *News*, 18 October 2013, <http://www.businesskorea.co.kr/english/news/politics/1737-union-eurasian-nations-korean-president-park-proposes-%E2%80%9Csilksilk-road-express%E2%80%9D-connect> [2017-03-12].
- 9 Russia Beyond, ‘Seoul “punishes” Pyongyang by suspending Trans-Korean railway project’, *News*, 12 February 2016, http://rbth.com/international/2016/02/12/seoul-punishes-pyongyang-by-suspending-trans-korean-railway-project_567087 [2017-03-24].
- 10 A. V. Rinna, ‘Here Is Why South Korea May Be Turning to Russia’, *The National Interest*, 6 February 2018, <http://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-buzz/here-why-south-korea-may-be-turning-russia-24370> [2018-07-07].
- 11 G. Ivashentsov, ‘Prospects for Russia – Republic of Korea Relations’, in: I. S. Ivanov (ed.), *Russia – Republic of Korea Relations: Revising the Bilateral Agenda*, Russia International Affairs Council Working Paper, no. X1/2013, Moscow 2013, p. 10.

of Russia's foreign trade, and only 2.3% of the foreign trade of South Korea remains largely insignificant.¹² Moreover, as monitored by the Korean International Trade Association in 2016 exports from Russia to South Korea had hit a record low.¹³

Status of South Korea–Russia Trade between 2010-2016 in US\$

Year	Export (US\$)	Inc. rate	Import (US\$)	Inc. rate
2010	7,759,836	85.0	9,899,456	71.0
2011	10,304,880	32.8	10,852,171	9.6
2012	11,097,138	7.7	11,354,318	4.6
2013	11,149,103	0.5	11,495,500	1.2
2014	10,129,249	-9.1	15,669,238	36.3
2015	4,685,732	-53.7	11,308,287	-27.8
2016	4,768,751	1.8	8,640,613	-23.6

Source: KITA, 2018.

The blame for the substantial breakdown in bilateral trade in the years 2014-2016, has been put on Russia's economic downturn caused by falling oil prices and the devaluation of the Russian ruble.¹⁴ Yet there also seems to be a political component to this disruption. South Korean hesitation to engage more closely with Russia might be a result of the 2014 political turmoil, which began with Russia's annexation of Crimea and the imposition of Western sanctions on the Russian economy. Korean investors, wary of the unstable economic and political environment might be simply waiting out these political uncertainties. In the meantime however, the South Korean government – despite having expressed its support for Ukraine's territorial integrity and sovereignty – has not join the West and Japan in imposing sanctions on Russia for

12 S. Suslina, 'Traditional and New Areas of Bilateral Trade', in: I. S. Ivanov (ed.), *Russia – Republic of Korea Relations: Revising the Bilateral Agenda*, Russia International Affairs Council, Working Paper, no. X1/2013, Moscow 2013, pp. 22-29.

13 KITA, 'K-Statistics by Country: Russia', 7 July 2018, http://www.kita.org/kStat/byCount_SpeCount.do [2018-07-07].

14 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Korea, 'Chapter 4: Strengthening Cooperation with Neighboring Countries: Korea – Russia Relations', in: *Diplomatic White Paper 2016*, Seoul 2016, pp. 94-100.

its annexation of Crimea. It has also refrained from criticizing Russia overtly and moreover on the occasion of China's Victory Day Ceremony in September 2016 and the G20 Summit in November 2016 reaffirmed its will to maintain a stable and firm bilateral relationship with Russia.¹⁵ This openness to cooperation with Russia will in the future depend however on two major issues: on the degree of Russia's protest against the North Korean nuclear weapons program development and on the state of South Korea's strategic alliance with the United States under U.S. President Donald Trump's administration.

2. Russia's relations with North Korea

From the establishment of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) in 1948, until its demise in 1991, the Soviet Union remained Pyongyang's important political, military and economic ally. Having been the main (although reluctant) supporter of the North in the 1952 Korean war, the Soviet establishment was seen by the Kim Il-Song regime, as instrumental in maintaining the country's independence and receiving help in economic development and military modernization. From the DPRK perspective the relations with the USSR served also as a leverage in its relations with China.¹⁶ The Soviet Union on the other hand sought to use its economic and military assistance as means of exerting political pressure on North Korea. By implementing a smart policy of selectively extending its commitments it wanted North Korea to remain non-hostile to the USSR and neutral in its disputes with China.¹⁷

With the dismantlement of the Soviet Union in 1991, bilateral relations experienced a significant setback. The demise of the geopolitical aspect of this relation, led the Russian Federation, under the leadership of President Boris Yeltsin, to withdraw from the 1961 North Korean-Soviet Mutual Aid and Cooperation Friendship Treaty, which

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ H. Gelman and N. D. Levin, 'The Future of Soviet-North Korean Relations', *RAND Corporation Paper no. R-3159-AF*, October 1984, <http://www.rand.org/dam/rand/pubs/reports/2009/R3159.pdf> [2017-03-17].

¹⁷ B. Ahn, 'The Soviet Union and the Korean Peninsula', *Asian Affairs: An American Review*, vol. 11, issue 4, 1985, pp. 1-20.

offered DPRK immediate assistance in case of military conflict. By 1996 North Korea informed the Russian Federation, that it has been listed as a hostile state, because of its arms sales to South Korea. In the 1990s Pyongyang had also effectively excluded Russia from the Korean peace-talk format of 1953.¹⁸ It was only under Vladimir Putin's presidency that a visible improvement of bilateral relations was observed and sealed by the Russian President's first visit to North Korea in September 2000. As part of its "Pivot to Asia" policy, the Russian Federation had offered DPRK a new intergovernmental Treaty on Friendship, Good Neighborly Relations and Cooperation, which laid legal grounds for the development of trade, economic, scientific, and technical relations.¹⁹ In return Russia was invited to the "Six-Party Talks", which until today remain the main platform of dialogue on the peaceful resolution of the security concerns related to the North Korean nuclear weapons program.²⁰ The rapprochement has intensified economic cooperation between the two sides. It was at the beginning of the 2000s that Russia first started to discuss its plans to sell electricity and natural gas to South Korea that would have to go through the territory of North Korea. In those years imports from Russia to DPRK have risen steadily, although exports to Russia have not, mainly due to an absence of an internal payment system in North Korea.²¹ By September 2012 Russia agreed to write off 90% of North Korea's \$11 billion historic debt as a sign of closer engagement with DPRK's new leader, Kim Jong-Un, who came to power the previous year.²² When the decision entered into force in 2014, Moscow decided to direct a remaining 10% (about 1 billion dollars) of the debt as an invest-

18 Jakimowicz, op. cit., p. 229.

19 Jamestown Foundation, 'Russia And North Korea Sign Friendship Treaty', *Monitor*, vol. 6, issue 30, 17 February 2000, <https://jamestown.org/program/russia-and-north-korea-sign-friendship-treaty/> [2017-03-12].

20 Established in 2003, the Six-Party Talks are a series of multilateral talks with a primary mean of pressuring North Korea to denuclearize and to coordinate policy between the six main countries involved China, Russia, the United States, Japan and North and South Korea.

21 S. Haggard and M. Noland, 'North Korea's External Economic Relations', *Working Paper Series*, Washington D.C.: Peterson Institute for International Economics, August 2007, <https://piie.com/publications/working-papers/north-koreas-external-economic-relations> [2018-08-02].

22 Reuters, 'Russia writes off 90 percent of North Korea's debt', *News*, 18 September 2012, <http://uk.reuters.com/article/russia-northkorea-debt-idUKL6NoNB04L20140419> [2017-03-02].

ment in bilateral cooperation on the DPRK's territory.²³ The write-off, is seen as the first step to increase Russia's share in the foreign trade of North Korea accounted in 2013 for a mere 1%.²⁴

Regardless of the enhanced economic cooperation, Russia continued to support UN sanctions which were imposed on North Korea in 2006, 2009, 2012, as a response to the nuclear test conducted by Pyongyang. The logic of Russian foreign policy towards the DPRK was based on two pillars. On the one side Russia joined the international condemnation of the Kim regime's breaches of the global nuclear nonproliferation system. On the other hand, however, it is strongly opposed any military action on the peninsula, which could lead to regime change in North Korea.²⁵ Moscow understood that a successful nuclear program in North Korea would eventually lead to the nuclearisation of other key players in the region, including Japan, South Korea and even Taiwan. With the goal of assuring the prevalence of status-quo, the Russian Federation continued its engagement in the Six-Party Talks, despite their temporary discontinuation since 2009.

A new, interesting stage of bilateral relations began in 2014. "Putin Pivot to Asia", was motivated by Moscow's need to diversify its international options after the breakdown of relations with the West over the war in Ukraine. By strengthening its relations with DPRK, Russia hopes to increase its bargaining power with the West and China. For North Korea, the timing could not have been more suitable. The heavy economic reliance of Pyongyang on China, coupled with international sanctions, made the DPRK economy extremely vulnerable to external pressures.²⁶ For the Kim regime, better ties with Russia spelled hope for an additional economic boost and a way to balance its unequal

23 A. Orlov and K. Romanova, 'Кимам простили долг – Россия спишет долги КНДР', *Gazeta.ru*, 19 February 2014, <http://www.gazeta.ru/business/2014/02/19/5916573.shtml> [2018-08-02].

24 DJ Kim, 'Russian influence on North Korea: views of former South Korean Ambassadors to Russia', *The Korean Journal of Defense Analysis*, vol. 24, no. 3, 2012, pp. 391-404.

25 L. Zakharova, 'Economic cooperation between Russia and North Korea: New goals and new approaches', *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, vol. 7, no. 2, July 2016, pp. 151-161.

26 P. Cherkashin, 'Current Russian-North Korean relations and prospects of their development', *Russian International Affairs Council Blog*, 25 August 2015, <http://russiancouncil.ru/en/blogs/dvfu-en/2022/> [2018-08-02].

relation with China.²⁷ Since 2014 North Korea has thus demonstrated an unprecedented level of openness and willingness to cooperate with Russian investors and business, proposing visa liberalization and an easier access to communication technologies such as mobile phones, internet etc. Moreover, Pyongyang counts on the realization of bilateral infrastructure projects, which would allow for the export of its mineral resources (among them the *Pobeda* railway modernization project).²⁸

In sum, Russia's policy towards North Korea is characterized by a high degree of pragmatism and lack of ideological approach.²⁹ The nuclear stalemate in the Korean Peninsula might be indeed the main source of military threats in Northeast Asia; yet a change of status-quo would probably prove more deadly for Moscow. Very telling is the Russian regime's recent reaction to the months of escalating rhetoric between Pyongyang and Washington, which ended in July 2018 with a surprising Singapore meeting between President Trump and Kim Jong-un. Back in 2017 the Russian Federation made attempts to deescalate tensions between both sides, pushing for a China-led roadmap for peace.³⁰ The Kremlin was particularly concerned about the U.S and South Korea undertaking regular joint military drills close to the North Korean border. In 2018, as the Singapore meeting was drawing closer, Russia officially praised the ongoing détente, with President Putin calling the decision to begin high level dialogue between the US and North Korea as "brave and mature".³¹ Acknowledging its own limitations to influence North Korea, Russia seems to have for now accepted President Trump as an integral element to solving the denuclearization dilemma.

27 E. Talmadge, 'Why Russia is bolstering ties with North Korea', *The Guardian*, 4 June 2014, *World/Europe*, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jun/04/russia-bolster-ties-north-korea> [2018-08-02].

28 Zakharova, op. cit., pp. 158-159.

29 R. York, 'Russia craves balance on the Korean Peninsula. To maintain an influence in North and South Korea, Moscow must "stand on both legs": Experts', *NKNews.org*, 2 November 2015, <http://www.nknews.org/2015/11/russia-craves-balance-on-the-korean-peninsula/> [2017-03-02].

30 C. Stevenson, 'Lavrov's North Korea visit a reminder to Trump that Russia cannot be ignored', *The Independent*, 31 May 2018, <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/trump-north-korea-meeting-russia-lavrov-kim-jong-un-pyongyang-syria-a8378331.html> [2018-07-07].

31 BBC, 'Trump Kim summit: US and North Korean leaders hold historic', *News/World*, 12 June 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-44435035> [2018-08-03].

3. Three scenarios of reunification of the Korean Peninsula

In order to analyze the role Russia could play in the reunification of the Korean Peninsula, it is first and foremost necessary to indicate the scenarios under which such a process could take place. Whatever assumption one might make about the future, it is realistic to say that given North Korea's archaic economy and unsustainable political system, reunification will require first and foremost the leadership of the South and significant international support. This would have to happen in all three cases discussed below: a peaceful reunification, a reunification that would result from North Korean regime's collapse or from an all-out war on the Peninsula.

Scenario 1: Peaceful Reunification

The idea of the peaceful reunification process has continued to be official state policy of South Korea since the early 1980s. In a document published on September 11th, 1989 entitled "Korean National Community Unification Formula" the South Korean government proposed a three-stage reconciliation process which would start with enhanced cooperation in a number of practical issues, then move into establishing a Korean Commonwealth with two diverging political systems and finally after years of integration move into a unified country. The step-by-step consultative and cooperative process would lead to the creation of an advanced, democratic country where freedom, welfare and human dignity are upheld.³² The commitment to the three stages of peaceful unification, have been repeated in 2014, by President Park Geun-hye, in an official document entitled the "Initiative for Peaceful Unification on the Korean Peninsula" announced during her visit to Germany. Known also as the "Dresden Initiative" the document proposes, as part of the ongoing stage one, increased humanitarian aid to the North; resuming of regular reunions for separated families, developing joint infrastructure and agriculture projects and greater

32 Y. H. Park, 'South and North Korea's Views on the Unification of the Korean Peninsula and Inter-Korean Relations', *Working Paper*, Korean Institute for National Unification, 2nd KRIS-Brookings Joint Conference on "Security and Diplomatic Cooperation between ROK and US for the Unification of the Korean Peninsula", 21 January 2014, <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/Park-Young-Ho-paper.pdf> [2018-08-03].

people-to-people contact across the border.³³ The Formula leaves however many questions unanswered. Among the most pressing would be: how to exhaust the North Korean model to the extent in which even the elites in Pyongyang are convinced it is no longer sustainable; how to reeducate the North Korea populations in order for it to match the demands of a liberal democracy and the modern world in general; and finally how to pay for the reunification process which is estimated to cost approximately \$3 trillion, without risking a loss of global competitiveness of a united Korea.³⁴

Scenario 2: Regime Collapse

The second scenario would foresee a reunification in the Korean peninsula, which results from the Kim regime's sudden collapse. Such a scenario was deemed very likely in the early 1990s, immediately after the breakdown of the communist system worldwide. Despite regime survival, Pyongyang's growing economic struggles and external pressures make this option still a viable one. Because of the extreme suppression of the North Korean society, a regime change would most likely not be bottom-up. Instead, it would result from a turmoil in the upper echelons of the regime and a failing international support which then denies vital aid and supplies to the citizens. In the optimistic scenario, the Kim regime is replaced by a moderate administration, which in cooperation with the South and in return for financial assistance oversees a slow transition of power, which eventually leads to reunification in accordance to scenario 1. The more likely, pessimistic scenario, foresees some form of arms struggle between the loyal Kim supporters and their opponents. A civil war on the Korean peninsula would immediately destabilize the entire East Asian region and likely become the center of attention for all regional actors. A flow of refugees seeking safety from the fighting would affect its neighbors while the question of control of DPRK's nuclear stockpiles and armaments

33 Ministry of Unification of the Republic of Korea, 'Initiative for Korean Unification', *Press Release*, 27 March 2015, http://www.unikorea.go.kr/eng_unikorea/news/releases/?boardId=bbs_0000000000034&mode=view&cntId=42576&category=&pageIdx=5 [2018-07-03].

34 S. Kim, 'Korean unification costs would exceed \$2.7 trillion: Researcher', *NKNews.com*, 6 March 2014, <https://www.nknews.org/2015/03/unification-costs-would-exceed-2-7-trillion-researcher/> [2017-02-28].

would be of major concern for the entire international community. In such a situation the United Nations Security Council would most probably give approval for a direct military intervention in North Korea by countries such as the United States and China. Reunification in this scenario would be achieved under South Korea's leadership, after a long peace-keeping and stabilization process.

Scenario 3: War on the Korean Peninsula

In the third scenario, reunification happens only after a full-scale war on the peninsula. This could be triggered in three cases: if North Korea invades the South, South Korea and the USA invade the North, or China invades the North. It is naturally, the most undesirable scenario with a number of possible consequences. A full scale invasion of South Korea by the Kim regime is unlikely but not impossible. The regime has so far learned to play the game of engaging in a cycle of serious international provocations in order to gain concessions from the international community. It is also fully aware of the fact, that the North Korean troops would not stand a chance against a unified South Korea–US effort against it.³⁵ However, since 2011, North Korea's new leader Kim Jong-un seems to be misunderstanding or over-estimating his role and abilities.³⁶ The country's policy right now is highly reliant on both its internal situation and its ability to deal with the perceived unpredictability of the U.S administration under President Donald Trump. A North Korean act of aggression is possible if Kim Jong-un feels cornered down by real or imaginary threats to regime survival and launches an offensive as a defense strategy. It is also likely, if the regime gains a self-confidence boost with the acquisition of a nuclear warheads. Having in mind that South Korea and the United States have a joint plan of operations prepared for the event of an invasion (known as OPLAN 5027), the likelihood of DPRK's victory is close to none. Yet, if North Korea would deploy its nuclear, chemical and biological arsenal the costs of the war would be immense for the entire

35 Global Firepower, '2018 Military Strength Ranking', 18 April 2018, <http://www.globalfirepower.com/countries-listing.asp> [2018-07-03].

36 This would include three successful nuclear tests in 2013 and in January and September 2016 and a successful assassination attempt in Malaysia on the half-brother Kim Jong-nam, which was done with VX nerve agent.

peninsula. The most likely response of the international community to such events would be that presented in scenario two: a UN approved military action which would spell an end to the Kim regime and an internationally monitored reunification of the peninsula under the leadership of the South.

The two other options in this scenario is that either South Korea/ US or China launch a preemptive attack on Pyongyang. This would be likely if the Kim Jong-un regime intensifies the spiral of provocations, which directly threatens the stability of the region, or if it actually obtains an inter-continental ballistic missile nuclear warhead capable of global reach. A preemptive strike from the United States – an option taken under consideration by the Trump administration – does not necessitate a full-scale military invasion, but will require some kind of post-strike engagement in order to prevent the internal destabilization of North Korea. Under special circumstances (if North Korea uses nuclear weapons against other countries), one can even imagine a joint US–China peace-operation – particularly if the UN is slow to react. China however may have a completely different agenda in mind. It can intervene in order to preserve the regime, or install a puppet-regime to assure a buffer-zone between its borders and US-backed South Korea. It may also be interested in gaining access to the North Korean mineral reserves and seaports. Such a unilateral intervention of China (for whatever reason it might be) will provoke retaliation from the US and South Korea, which can in turn simultaneously invade North Korea to stop the Chinese invasion. In order to prevent a world war, the partition of North Korea could prove to be the only viable option.³⁷

4. Russia's role in the three scenarios of reunification

Due to its proximity, history and geostrategic considerations, in all three scenarios, the Russian Federation could not remain neutral. The most prominent and constructive role for Moscow would be

³⁷ C. Cheang, 'Can Russia help being cut out of North Korea negotiations?', *East Asia Forum*, 7 July 2018, <http://www.easiaforum.org/2018/07/07/can-russia-help-being-cut-out-of-north-korea-negotiations/> [2018-08-03].

assured in scenario one. As a party trusted by both Pyongyang and Seoul, the Russian Federation could become a confidence-builder, impartial mediator and honest-broker in the process of peaceful reunification of the peninsula. Moscow could extend its security guarantees to the Kim regime's high ranking officials, who might want to attempt to fight against a such a reunification. Having extensive experience in organizing professional exchanges for North Korean officials, Russia would also be a source of know-how in the area of integrating the elites of both states. Finally, it could project its soft power by providing humanitarian assistance to the North, as well as foreign direct investments to projects of critical importance for itself and for both Korea. Among these would be a trans-Korean railway, a trans-Korean oil and gas infrastructure and other logistical projects.

The Russian Federation has a number of good reasons to support a peaceful reunification of the continent. Besides the obvious economic incentives coming from increased trade with the peninsula, there are also several political reasons why reunification would be in Russia's interest. First, only the normalization of relations between South and North Korea would remove one of the main obstacles on the way of creating a multilateral system of security and cooperation in Northeast Asia. As argued by Georgy Toloraya in the first stage of the reconciliation process "Russia could offer a new concept of maintaining peace on the Korean peninsula, based on a system of cross-agreements among all the Six-Party process participants, which would legally secure their rights and obligations towards other members in regard to the situation on the Korean peninsula".³⁸ Second, if played wisely by Moscow, a United Korea would be well disposed towards Russia, becoming a predictable political and economic partner in the Northeast Asian region.³⁹ Third, as South Korea remains committed to the idea of a post-unification destruction of North Korea's nuclear weapons arsenal, Russia could also count on a much more stable security environment on its Eastern border. Finally, successfully assisting the re-

38 G. Toloraya, 'Inter-Korean Dialogue and Reconciliation Prospects', in: *Russia – Republic of Korea Relations: Revising The Bilateral Agenda*, Russian International Affairs Council Working Paper, no. X1/2013, pp. 51-52.

39 D. Trenin, 'Russia's Asia Policy under Vladimir Putin, 2000-5', in: G. Rozman and K. Togo, J. P. Ferguson (eds), *Russian Strategic Thought toward Asia*, New York: Palgrave, 2006, p. 124.

unification process, would increase Russia's image as a global power and a constructive security partner in Northeast Asia.

From Moscow's perspective however there are clear dangers associated with a peaceful reconciliation process in the Korean peninsula. The shared land border with North Korea significantly complicates Russia's security considerations as a reunification scenario would bring the US-allied South into direct contact. Although no longer Russia's enemy, South Korea accommodates nearly 30,000 U.S. service members of the South Korea/U.S. Combined Forces Command, which after reunification could have also access to Russia's "near abroad". Secondly, the creation of a United Korea would increase the competition on the natural resources market, as North's mineral wealth (estimated to be about \$10 trillion) would be now available for South Korean companies to explore.⁴⁰ Finally, if the process takes place in accordance with the 1989 Formula, then United Korea would become a fully democratic state. Russia's recent struggles against the liberal world however, gives little place for optimism about its support for further democratization in its "near-abroad". All these arguments suggest that Russia will be extremely cautious in supporting a peaceful reunification and will probably expect a "grand bargain" between itself, China and the U.S. first. Such a bargain would include the complete withdrawal of U.S. troops from the peninsula and a new institutional security framework for the region.

The role of Russia in scenario two and three would be probably more limited than in scenario one, but not insignificant. From a Russian perspective both options would result in the annulment of political influence in Pyongyang, the destabilization on its Eastern borders (with a refugee and humanitarian crisis spilling into Russia's Far-East) and a raise of political significance of its geopolitical rivals: either the United States or China, or both. Russia would most probably take part in a UN led military operation under scenario 2, in order to prevent unilateral actions of others, but it would not be allowed to become a leading party. The future of the peninsula would thus rely on the ac-

40 The Economist, 'What North and South Korea would gain if they were reunified', *Korea Opportunities*, 5 May 2016, <http://www.economist.com/blogs/graphicdetail/2015/10/daily-chart-5> [2018-08-03].

tions of its geopolitical rivals. Later, if some kind of reunification was to take place, Russia could act as a spoiler by supporting former Kim-regime officials and undermining trust between the two partners. The efficiency of such actions however is difficult to predict. All this means that neither scenario one or two would have any attractiveness for Moscow. Russia has thus no interest in seeing or provoking any scenario which would lead to war in the peninsula and will work to prevent such a war at any cost.⁴¹

In sum, there is a role to play for Russia in any of the three scenarios. None however seems optimal from Moscow's perspective. This is why Russia is determined to first and foremost preserve the *status quo* reality of a divided Korean peninsula.⁴²

Conclusions

Over the last two decades Russia has with no doubt managed to recover its geopolitical position on the Korean peninsula. It has also been consistently paying lip-service to the official state strategy of securing stability and peace in the region that will create favorable conditions for economic development and reforms in Russian Far East and Russia as a whole. The Korean unification, especially in its peaceful scenario, would contribute positively to the realization of this goal. Yet, a closer look at Russia's recent foreign policy conduct shows, that geopolitical considerations trump economic and stability ones. As shown by the Russian-waged war in Donbass, the leadership in the Kremlin is willing to sacrifice its economic interest, and even the stability on its own border for larger strategic gains. In this context the goal of the reunification of Korea will be supported by the Russian Federation, only as long as it does not interfere with the global game plan of Russia – whether it be weakening the Western liberal order or constraining China. As argued in this article, sustaining the current *status quo* on the Korean peninsula seems to be the most optimal options for Russia. It will thus try to constrain North Korea from overly excessive provocations, at the same time seeing Pyongyang's policies as an effective way to distract

41 Jakimowicz, op. cit., p. 248.

42 Trenin, op. cit., p. 124.

the United States from other international issues important for Russia (Ukraine, Syria). Sustaining strong relationship with North Korea will remain a priority for Moscow, but does not exclude Russia's interest in halting the DPRK nuclear program.⁴³ In this area it will surely find common ground with South Korea. If however Seoul would like to see the Russian Federation as a strong partner in a future reconciliation process on the peninsula, it will be bitterly disappointed. At the same time a divided Korea might serve Russian interest in Northeast Asia today, but not necessarily tomorrow. As the 2018 meeting in Singapore showed, with the dynamic international environment, unpredictability of the Kim Jong-un regime and the "unknown-unknowns" of the Trump Presidency, the *status-quo* option might not be on the table a few years from now – a scenario which Russia surely needs to prepare for.

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43 Jakimowicz, op. cit., p. 247.

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