



the North Korean embassy in Moscow, Russia.

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Russia's Love Affair With North Korea

The logic behind Moscow's economic outreach to Pyongyang.

By **Samuel Ramani**
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On February 3, 2017, North Korean leader Kim Jong-un sent out Lunar New Year greeting cards to numerous world leaders, highlighting the DPRK's array of international allies. Even though China has been frequently described as North Korea's leading international ally, Pyongyang's state-controlled news agency, KCNA, **listed Russia at the top of the list of countries** friendly toward the DPRK, relegating China to second place.

Kim's placement of Russia at the top of North Korea's symbolic hierarchy of allies for the third consecutive year is a considerable break from Kim Jong-Il's public emphasis on the DPRK's alliances with China and Cuba. Pyongyang's symbolic show of solidarity with the Kremlin has also been accompanied by a string of economic deals with Russia.

The expansion of Russian investment in the North Korean economy has entrenched Moscow's role as a guarantor (along with China) of the Kim regime's survival. Although Russia's ability to benefit economically from closer links with North Korea is limited, Russian President Vladimir Putin's willingness to deepen its alliance with Pyongyang highlights Moscow's desire to expand its role as a stakeholder in the preservation of long-term peace in the Korean peninsula.

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Russia's Recent Expansion of Economic Assistance to North Korea

Even though Russian policymakers have consistently supported sanctions against North Korea for its nuclear weapons buildup and publicly criticized the DPRK regime's belligerent foreign policy, the Kremlin has played a critical role in ameliorating North Korea's economic isolation. The contrast between Kremlin rhetoric and policy towards North Korea has been most stark in the spheres of infrastructure and energy.

On January 31, Russia's state news agency, *TASS*, reported that Russia Railways representatives visited North Korea to discuss **an expansion of railway links between the two countries**. The Russian delegation's trip proved fruitful, as both parties agreed to expand training opportunities for North Korean engineers at Russian universities.

Increasing the exposure of North Korean workers to Russian technical expertise will allow more North Koreans to staff the Rajin-Hasan railway, which links Russia to the Korean peninsula. Even though South Korea withdrew itself from the **Rajin-Hasan railway project in March 2016**, Moscow's willingness to continue the project's development highlights the strength of its relationship with the North Korean regime, during a period of unprecedented isolation for Pyongyang.

As China's oil supplies to North Korea have been periodically disrupted due to tensions between Beijing and Pyongyang, Moscow's importance as an investor in the DPRK's energy sector has increased markedly. Siberian oil companies have sold fuel to North Korea via a supply route linking Vladivostok to Rajin. These fuel supplies have **provided the North Korean regime** with vital hard currency, as the DPRK has processed Siberian oil in chemical plants and resold it to Chinese consumers.

Kim has responded to Russia's consistency as a North Korean economic ally by publicly hailing the DPRK's partnership with Moscow and increasing its shipments of guest workers to construction projects in Siberia. The presence of **10,000 North Koreans in Russia** and the DPRK's convenience as a source of cheap labor for Putin's attempts to modernize Vladivostok suggests that Moscow is unlikely to match its critical rhetoric on North Korea's nuclear buildup with retaliatory actions for the foreseeable future.

Russia's Growing Importance as a Stakeholder in the Korean Peninsula

Even though Russia participated in the Six Party Talks on North Korean nuclear disarmament from 2003-2007, many Western analysts have argued that Russia's influence over the security situation in the Korean peninsula is relatively limited. Despite these assumptions, there are two reasons why Russia could become a more influential stakeholder in the Korean peninsula in the short to medium term.

First, some Russian analysts believe that the likely defeat of the right-wing Saenuri Party in South Korea's upcoming presidential elections will result in an improvement of relations between Moscow and Seoul. Many left-leaning South Korean politicians have supported a more independent foreign policy course and have **criticized Washington's proposed deployment of the THAAD missile defense system** to South Korea. These sentiments provide an opening for fruitful Russian diplomacy, especially if the new South Korean president adopts a more dovish foreign policy stance toward Pyongyang.

An improvement in Russia's relationship with South Korea could increase its influence over the security situation on the Korean peninsula, because Russia would be able to uniquely position itself as a strategic partner of both Pyongyang and Seoul. Once a relationship based on trust and interdependent interests is forged, Putin will hope to strike a deal with Seoul on managing North Korea's conduct.

Russian policymakers believe that if Moscow can demonstrate its ability to rein in North Korea's belligerence by diplomatically engaging with Pyongyang, South Korea will rejoin the Rajin-Hasan railway project. This scenario is much more likely to come to fruition after a change of government in South Korea, so the Kremlin views the turmoil resulting from President Park Geun-hye's impeachment with cautious optimism.

Second, Russia is the only great power (aside from China) which has direct leverage over the stability of the North Korean regime. Since an act of impulsive aggression by North Korea is more likely if Kim's regime feels the need to deflect from internal weakness, Russian support for Kim's patronage machine will reduce the risk of unilateral North Korean aggression. Even if this logic does not hold and a security crisis engulfs the Korean peninsula, Moscow can use its leverage over the DPRK to pressure Kim to defuse tensions with South Korea.

In particular, Putin can link a North Korean pledge of non-aggression on the Korean peninsula to the maintenance of Russia's stiff border control policies. As part of a treaty between Moscow and Pyongyang on the **repatriation of criminals**, Kremlin policymakers have mandated the deportation of all North Koreans who illegally enter Russian territory. This policy has been strictly enforced, as Russia only granted permanent asylum to two North Korean nationals from 2004-2014.

Russia's cooperation with the DPRK on curbing asylum seekers has strengthened Kim's hold on power by preventing a highly destabilizing outflow of refugees from North Korea to Russia. If Putin tells Kim that launching a military strike on South Korea would result in the abrogation of this border control policy, the DPRK will likely ameliorate tensions with South Korea to prevent mass defections and ensure that its guest workers in Russia continue sending back hard currency to Pyongyang.

While many analysts have assumed that Russia's deepened alliance with North Korea is a merely a symbolic display of anti-American defiance, a closer examination of Russian conduct reveals a more far-reaching strategic agenda. If Moscow proves to be an effective mediator in the Korean peninsula, Putin will be able to entrench Russia's position as a major powerbroker in the Asia-Pacific region for years to come.

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