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“LOOKING FOR A ROAD TO PEACE AND RECONCILIATION IN KOREA”

Looking for a Road to Peace and Reconciliation in Korea

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Abstract

Experience of dealing with the DPRK testifies that excessive pressure and coercion had led, in majority of cases, to greater suspicion and hostility, while engagement and respect for certain positions shaped by history's legacies, brought about cooperation and compromise. It is highly likely that not sanctions and intimidation, but involvement of the DPRK in globalization and cooperation processes in NEA may bring about positive changes in Pyongyang's international behavior. Only inviting in honest North Korea to participate in realization of multilateral economic projects with Russia, Republic of Korea and other regional countries can convince Pyongyang that international community had taken on a road leading to the DPRK gradual and peaceful integration in existing international political and economic order instead of forcing on the country a regime change scenario.

1. Introduction

The inter-Korean summits in 2000 and 2007 demonstrated that the pan-Korean national interests have ever than any time before become a major factor, which should be taken into account by all parties concerned when formulating and realizing their respective policies toward the Korean peninsula. It seems that the decisions to hold both summits were prompted by realization, both in Seoul and in Pyongyang, of the fact that at the dawn of the 21st century possibilities available for achieving any tangible progress in inter-Korean relations by utilizing or, let's put it in a more explicit way – by siding with external forces - the U.S.A., China, Japan and Russia - had been exhausted.

In these circumstances the Koreans in the South and in the North tried to find their own way for the Korean settlement using for the purpose the growing understanding that a vital national interest of the Koreans in both parts of the country is to prevent a new war and open an era of inter-Korean reconciliation and cooperation.

Summing up, both inter-Korean summits were aimed to reduce the role of the “external factors” in the Korean affairs and to make the “big countries” to a greater degree to take into consideration the interests of the Koreans as a united nation. Therefore hence it is necessary for all parties concerned to foresee how one's Korean policy looks like from the point of view of pan-Korean interests.

The author explains reasons for Russia's consistent support for any steps aimed at promoting the process of rapprochement, reconciliation and cooperation between the South and the North in Korea. It also provides with some outlines of Moscow's vision of a reunited Korea and her place in any future security architecture in the region which should be acceptable for the Korean nation and all other major parties concerned.

2. Reunified Korea: A View from Russia

Russia generally welcomed all moves by two Korean states aimed at relaxation of tension and promoting inter-Korean cooperation because of two major considerations: Moscow hopes that the inter-Korean

reconciliation, firstly, will remove a threat of military conflict right next to her Eastern border, and secondly, promote more favorable environment for both development of Russia's bilateral economic ties with two Korean states as well as for implementation of multilateral economic projects with Russia's participation in Northeast Asia. There are expectations that in the long run a reunified Korea will be a country capable to maintain relations of friendship, good neighborhood and cooperation with Russia.

Russia's firm conviction is that there is no alternative to the inter-Korean dialogue and cooperation. Moscow never failed to confirm that "Russia supports the policy of developing dialogue between the two Korean states and bringing them closer together" and that "Russia has always aspired to, and today expresses its unequivocal support for, a dialogue and rapprochement of the Korean states and maintaining a denuclearized Korean peninsula."

Better relations between South and North Korea completely suit Russia's national interests because tension arising from time to time between Pyongyang and Seoul blocks realization of multilateral economic projects, like oil and gas pipelines, linking the Russian Trans-Siberian Mainline with the Trans-Korean railways. Russia believes that cooperation in a tripartite format, between Russia, the Republic of Korea and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, in the energy and transportation sectors can be a very important part of expanding bilateral cooperation between Moscow and Seoul. This is consistent Russia's position since Mr.Putin's first presidential term.

Improvement of relations between the DPRK and the ROK, along with providing with more favorable conditions for development of trade and economic cooperation between Russia and both parts of Korea, undoubtedly, would open new opportunities for economic development of the Russian Far East and for linking its economy to integration processes in the Asia-Pacific region.

Besides being economically advantageous, such interaction is highly likely to contribute to the confidence-building between South and North Korea. Russia believes that trilateral cooperation "will not only be economically advantageous, but will also increase trust on the Korean peninsula."

President V. Putin re-confirmed this stance in his interview with KBS given before his official visit to the ROK in November 2013. "We definitely support the aspiration of Koreans for national unification. It's a natural process. However... it should be exclusively peaceful and take into account the interests of the North, as well as of the South", he said. "If the partners' interests are respected... this process can be very fruitful, constructive and bring great and positive results for the international politics, ensuring security in the region, as well as for the economics of the rapidly developing region", he elaborated. "However, I'd like to repeat that we'll support an exclusively peaceful process, we'll support exclusively those means, which...world lead to a positive outcome instead of conflicts, tragedies and destruction", V.Putin emphasized.

So both on security and economic reasons Russia is vitally interested in peace, reconciliation and unification of Korea. This conclusion seems especially important in view of continuing attempts by some experts to convince public opinion that none of the neighboring countries, including Russia, is interested in Korea's unification. Such attempts are aimed at placating some countries' egoistic policy and disguise their attempts to keep their military dominance in the region indefinitely at any price.

3. Nuclear Problem and Russia: Not All Options on the Table

Moscow is convinced that only removal of mutual concerns of all parties involved in the Six-party talks on the basis of a broad compromise will make it possible to achieve the goals of the world community with regard to the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. Russia's firm stand is to achieve this aim through political-diplomatic means only.

Firstly, any war on Russia's borders, to say nothing of one with high possibility of using WMD, will be a direct threat to her security. The security of Russia's Far Eastern regions and their population's lives directly depend on how events in Korea will evolve.

In case of an armed conflict on the peninsula the radioactive clouds from dozens of South Korean Chernobyl (many of 25 South Korean atomic power plants could be destroyed by North Korea with conventional weapons only), and streams of refugees would not reach the U.S. Pacific coast, but they would certainly reach Russia's Far East territory.

Threat of a major conflict on the peninsula can sharply increase outflow of the population from the Russian Far East. In case a war is unleashed, the demographic situation in the Far East can become just catastrophic.

Secondly, in case of an armed conflict in Korea, Moscow could hardly expect implementation of multilateral energy and transportation projects in this region with which Russia links social and economic development of her Far Eastern region.

Russia believes that dialogue with North Korea must be resumed, attempts to intimidate the country must be stopped and a way to settle these matters peacefully must be found. Is this possible? Russia believes so, "especially considering the positive experience of such dialogue with North Korea... Regrettably, the negotiating parties failed to muster the patience to translate this intention into reality."

Another major difference in Russia and the U.S.A. approaches to the problem are ways and means to resolve the issue. Russia believes that "sanctions of any kind are useless and ineffective in this case" since, according to Mr. Putin, the North Koreans "will eat grass, but they will not abandon this program unless they feel safe". "In this environment, in this situation, whipping up military hysteria is absolutely pointless; it is a dead end," the Russian President warned, adding that it "may lead to a global, planet-wide disaster and enormous casualties".

Moscow strongly believes that diplomacy is the only way to solve the North Korean nuclear problem. The more so that the DPRK's public statements and secret contacts with the U.S. representatives confirmed that Pyongyang's priority remains finding of a certain compromise with the U.S.A. as the only way to remove or lessen an external threat, lift sanctions, albeit partially, and to get access to foreign investments and markets.

So success of any future talks on the nuclear problem will depend mainly on what choice will be made by the U.S.A. - whether it limits its demands to North Korea to a nonproliferation agenda or continues to pursue simultaneously a backstage agenda to realize a regime change scenario. In the latter case the DPRK is unlikely to give up its "nuclear deterrent."

4. Neutral Korea: A Solution Acceptable for Everybody

History of the Korean settlement for the last 25 years, including time and again encountered difficulties in solving the nuclear issue on the Korean peninsula, makes us to conclude that without solution of a certain fundamental problem, directly related to the region's future security architecture as a whole, we will continue incessantly stumble on minor problems and will not be capable to tackle them.

The fundamental, key issue which any future peace process in Northeast Asia should to resolve is defining an acceptable for all four "big countries" (China, Russia, U.S.A and Japan) place for the reunified Korea in the future regional security system. Short of such a vision each and every participant of the future peace system will remain very suspicious about others' plans and motives.

Many politicians and experts in the U.S.A., the ROK and Japan have already included the re-unified Korea as a member of the tripartite alliance of U.S.A.-Japan-ROK, to which Australia has been already linked. However, such plans are unlikely to be welcomed in Moscow and Beijing. Both countries are likely to perceive such a triangle as a deterrent against Russia and China. Such an alliance would be tantamount to the emergence on Russia's eastern borders of a body similar to NATO, under the umbrella of THAAD system which is actively deployed by the U.S.A. and their allies in the region.

Calculations to the effect that future reunified Korea will be de-facto a forward base of maritime powers - the United States and Japan - against continental - China and Russia can hamper and is already hindering both the establishment of a reliable and sustainable peace mechanism in Northeast Asia, the solution of the nuclear problem and the re-unification of Korea.

The issue of foreign policy's orientation of the unified Korean state and its future alliances is extremely important, of course, not only for Russia, but also for China, the U.S.A. and Japan and, of course, for the Koreans themselves.

Neutralization of unified Korea with international guarantees from the U.S.A. China, Russia and Japan may be the most acceptable option to all those concerned and genially interested in an early and peaceful Korean settlement. Members of the "Big Four" (China, Russia, the U.S.A. and Japan) should give formal guarantees of the unified Korea's neutral status. This status could be supported and reinforced by the UN Security Council, which can adopt a special resolution to that effect.

The "big countries" should also take obligations to refrain from entering into any military alliance with the unified Korea and promise to each other and to the Koreans, of course, to never send to, or deploy their troops on the Korean soil (except in cases of unanimous decisions by the UN Security Council adopted in accordance with the UN Charter).

For its part, the unified Korea also should declare herself a neutral state, takes an obligation not to conclude military treaties with other countries (the existing agreements between China and North Korea, South Korea and the United States cease to have effect in due time), not to invite any foreign troops on her territory. The participation of the united Korea in various non-military international and regional organizations (APEC, ASEM, ASEAN Regional Forum, etc.), bilateral agreements on economic, trade and cultural cooperation are encouraged and supported.

Neutralization of a unified Korea will be a real “big bargain,” or compromise among the “Big Four”. It must be reached to serve as a cornerstone for a sustainable peace mechanism in Northeast Asia. The future security architecture in the region should not become a tool of imposing the interests of one or other group of countries onto other participants of such an organization. Russia stands for establishing the very such mechanism.

5. Conclusion

Meanwhile, the on-going suspension of negotiating process on the nuclear problem provide South and North Korea with unique chance through their own combined efforts to seize leadership in removing threat of another major conflict, promoting peace and common prosperity. The start of the 21st century proved that an inter-Korean dialogue has all chances to become a major factor of security and stability on the Korean peninsula. The dialogue is vitally necessary to improve the current uneasy situation on the peninsula.

The best option for the Koreans would be to resume working on implementation of the bilateral agreements and understandings reached between South and North Korea at the various talks and contacts held during several previous decades, including those agreed upon at the historical inter-Korean summits of 2000 and 2007. It is high time for Koreans both in the North and in the South to take its nation’s destiny in their own hands.

Russia hopes that the unified Korea will become her good neighbor and a major economic partner. Emergence of such an actor in the region is perceived as favorable for Russia since it would broaden her policy options in Northeast Asia. It is highly likely that the unified Korea, while remaining an Asian country and thus being surrounded by more powerful and populated Asian competitors (China and Japan), in order to ensure her national identity, would turn toward Russia which is the closest to Korea part of European civilization and can provide a direct link to Europe.

Russia’s Foreign Policy Concept, approved by President V.Putin last December states that “Russia is interested in maintaining traditionally friendly relations with the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea and the Republic of Korea, and will seek to ease confrontation and de-escalate tension on the Korean Peninsula, as well as achieve reconciliation and facilitate intra-Korean cooperation by promoting political dialogue.”

Addressing new challenges on the Korean peninsula, Russia has also demonstrated unprecedented level of readiness to take into consideration legitimate interests of all other parties concerned, to hold intrusive and regular consultations with them and, finally, to work together in search for a mutually acceptable solution of the problems which could jeopardise regional and world peace and security.