

Russia and the Two Koreas: The Dilemmas of “Dual Engagement”

JAMES CLAY MOLTZ

States change their foreign policies only reluctantly, given the difficulty and political costs of breaking old ties and establishing new ones. What is interesting about Soviet/Russian policy on the Korean Peninsula since 1985, however, is that its direction has changed not once, but *twice* in just slightly more than a decade: moving from an exclusive alliance with Pyongyang (1985–89), to a singular focus on relations with Seoul (1990–94), and now to a policy of so-called dual engagement (1995–98).

While the new policy might be praised for having eliminated the “extremes” of the two previous periods, in this article I argue that Moscow’s policy of courting two fiercely competing capitals raises several dilemmas for Russian foreign policy. First, in trying to accommodate the North and South simultaneously, Moscow could end up threatening relations with both. That happened to Soviet efforts in the 1970s to engage both Ethiopia and Somalia and also to Soviet efforts in the 1980s to maintain good relations with both Iran and Iraq during the first Gulf war. Second, a midpoint policy between two very different regimes presents a contradictory face to the rest of East Asia: does the new Russia represent democracy or old-style Stalinism? Third, and most serious, the policy of “dual engagement” may revive underlying domestic political disputes within Russia, which pit pro–South Korea reformists in the Yeltsin administration against pro–North Korea Duma hard-liners and regional elites. As currently pursued, the policy is one of

James Clay Moltz is assistant director and research professor at the Center for Nonproliferation Studies of the Monterey Institute of International Studies. He has published articles on Russian politics, economics, and security issues in such journals as *Soviet Economy*, *Post-Soviet Geography and Economics*, *The Journal of East Asian Affairs*, *Asian Survey*, and *World Politics*. An earlier version of this article was presented at the annual meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies, Seattle, Washington, 20–23 November 1997. The author thanks Paul Marantz, Alexei Zagorsky, and Charles Ziegler for their comments and recognizes the assistance of Tamara Troyakova and other Vladivostok scholars. Research on this project was supported by a travel grant from the International Research and Exchanges Board (IREX), with funds provided by the U.S. Department of State (Title VIII) and the National Endowment for the Humanities. The author alone is responsible for the views expressed in this study.

“parallel engagement” by two competing interest groups, rendering impossible the development of a *consensual* foreign policy that pursues a single set of goals within the region. Taken together, these dilemmas are worth examining in greater detail because they shed light on similar problems facing Russian foreign policy as a whole.

As a baseline, this history must be traced to the first years in power of Communist Party General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev, when he actually revitalized Soviet relations with North Korea, hoping to use it as a bridgehead for expanding Moscow’s influence in East Asia. But by the late 1980s, an increasingly pro-reform and now-President Gorbachev abandoned Pyongyang and signed on to a radical upgrading of ties with economically powerful South Korea, motivated by his new reformist politics as well as by hopes of acquiring economic development aid from Seoul. This strongly pro-Southern policy continued during the first years of Boris Yeltsin’s presidency for the same reasons. By 1994, however, Moscow had become disenchanted with the failure of major South Korean investment to materialize and frustrated with Russia’s growing isolation from great power negotiations on a general Korean Peninsula settlement. Conservatives in the Russian Duma began to believe that the Foreign Ministry had put too many eggs in the South Korean basket. In 1995, therefore, the Yeltsin government began to move back toward the middle, in an effort to “balance” Russian policy on the Korean Peninsula. This involved revitalizing relations with the Stalinist North, replete with the risks the new policy entailed for newly “democratic” Russia.

Among other results (discussed below), the recent renewal of ties with North Korea has led to more cases of drug smuggling, counterfeiting, human rights violations, and potentially dangerous diversions of nuclear materials and weaponry within neighboring sections of the Russian Far East. In Russian border diplomacy with North Korea, moreover, there have been unsettling recent incidents involving reversion by Russian officials to old patterns of Communist-era behavior, particularly by returning North Korean defectors and by failing to prosecute North Korean officials suspected of crimes (such as the murder of a South Korean diplomat in Vladivostok in September 1996). Politically, the shift has also strengthened the hand of local conservatives, such as Primorskiy Krai Governor Yevgeniy Nazdratenko, whose anti-market (and strongly anti-Chinese) campaigns have welcomed cheap North Korean labor as a substitute for fundamental regional economic reform. Meanwhile, in Moscow, the new policy of dual engagement has given a second wind to Russian Communists and other Duma reactionaries. In the Russian Far East, a nearly wholesale shift to a pro-Southern stance had taken place by 1994, thanks to local Korean investment and good will projects. The new policy has reignited a fierce battle between North and South Korea nationals over influence in the region, with Russia’s local Korean minority stuck uncomfortably in the middle of this struggle.

In the rest of this article I seek to uncover both the causes behind and the current implications of Russia’s new policy of dual engagement with the two Koreas. To put these developments into context, I first trace the history of Soviet/Russian-Korean relations since 1985. In examining recent trends, I seek to identify

the key groups at both the national and regional levels driving shifts in policy, as well as the tensions between them. In particular, I highlight the evolving struggles on the ground in the Russian Far East among several groups of Koreans: largely illegal Chinese-Korean immigrants; state-sponsored North Korean laborers; South Korean investors and education providers; and finally, two distinct groups of minority Russian-Koreans. These interactions provide a microcosm of the dilemmas posed by the current policy. I conclude by discussing possible means through which Russia could resolve some of these contradictions, thereby stabilizing its policy in East Asia and putting Russia into a better position to participate in the eventual process of Korean reunification.

From North to South in a Period of Tumultuous Reform (1985–89)

In contrast to his later years as general secretary, Mikhail Gorbachev's first years in power were characterized by a concerted effort to strengthen ties with Pyongyang as a means of boosting the Soviet presence in East Asia. In December 1985, for example, his government signed a bilateral agreement with North Korea to nearly triple Soviet–North Korean trade by the year 1990. Indeed, two-way trade jumped 52 percent from 1 billion rubles in 1985 (\$2.18 billion) to 1.6 billion rubles (\$3.5 billion) by 1988.¹ Moscow also continued to provide substantial food subsidies to North Korea, as well as access to cut-rate petroleum products for use in power generation and in industry.

Plans for the rapid expansion of contacts between the two economies included considerable upgrading of cooperation in key security fields, such as nuclear power and advanced weaponry. Among other projects, the Gorbachev regime agreed to build a four-block VVER-440 nuclear power plant at Sinpo on North Korea's east coast. While Moscow made Pyongyang's accession to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons a precondition, the agreement constituted a major shift from prior Soviet nuclear cooperation with North Korea, whose largest joint project to date had involved provision of a small, two megawatt research reactor at Yongbyon in the 1960s.² The Soviet Union also introduced a new military cooperation program³ for the transfer of advanced Soviet aircraft, tanks, and other equipment, and for production facilities for building MiG-29 fighters in North Korea.⁴

Over the course of 1986 and 1987, however, developments in Gorbachev's political strategy within the Communist Party began to have implications for relations with North Korea. Specifically, Gorbachev's decision to use internal debate as a means of initiating a struggle against old-style Brezhnevites led to reconsideration of support for old-style Communists abroad. By 1987, debates in the party press had begun to examine alternative economic models.⁵ For the first time, analysts began to question command-style socialism, which set off warning bells in Pyongyang. By 1988, Soviet economists were writing openly about the merits of the Japanese and South Korean economic models in bringing about rapid development in those countries. The articles implicitly questioned continued Soviet adherence to heavy-handed, inefficient socialist planning and dogmatic attitudes toward economic innovation. As it began to implement policies of *khozraschet*

(cost-accounting) in domestic enterprises, the Soviet Union began to consider seriously the implications of continuing to subsidize North Korea. Moreover, as the Gorbachev team elaborated plans for developing the Russian Far East with the assistance of foreign technology and investment, it became clear that capitalist South Korea had much more to offer than the North. From the point of view of Seoul, moreover, its own goals of eventual reunification with the North provided a strong political incentive to normalize relations with the Soviet Union as a possible means of bringing Pyongyang to the bargaining table.

For North Korea, this process marked the beginning of a gradual process of isolation and the unraveling of a whole complex of exclusive ties with Moscow.

Beyond the necessity of banning Soviet publications (which had by now begun to attack the legacy of Stalin), the rumors of Soviet–South Korean normalization meant a direct threat to North Korean economics and security, putting into doubt the 1961 bilateral Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation (requiring Soviet intervention in case of an attack on the North). By

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the late 1980s, bilateral trade began to move increasingly to a barter basis, as Soviet investment funds dried up and the North found itself incapable of responding to Moscow’s calls to convert trade to a hard currency basis.

The 1988 Olympics in Seoul proved an eye-opening experience for the Soviet government by making clear the striking contrast between conditions in the North and South. Reformists in the Gorbachev leadership could not help seeing that Soviet plans to develop the Far Eastern territories could move much faster with the aid of Seoul.

Direct trade ties and trips by South Korean business leaders began soon after the Olympics. In 1989, the Soviet Union agreed to a visit from then-South Korean opposition leader Kim Young Sam. By the time of Gorbachev’s meeting in San Francisco with South Korean President Roh Tae Woo in June 1990, the relationship with the South was blossoming, and that with the North was in rapid decline.⁶ Reeling from the loss of subsidies, bilateral trade turnover with Pyongyang plummeted to \$2.1 billion in 1989 and then \$1.1 billion in 1990.⁷

Putting Russian Eggs into a South Korean Basket (1990–94)

These trends continued and accelerated after the September 1990 establishment of formal diplomatic relations between Moscow and Seoul. South Korea’s proffering of a \$3 billion loan to assist Soviet reforms provided an additional incentive for Moscow’s shift of loyalties on the Korean Peninsula. At the same time, with the Soviet economy beginning to collapse, the Soviet Union began to steadily turn the screws on North Korea, forcing it to pay more and more for oil, cut-

ting back on agricultural subsidies, and calling for hard currency payments for future contracts.

The decline in relations with Pyongyang accelerated further after Boris Yeltsin seized power in December 1991. For the next several years, Russia's economic and political turmoil would make it unable to come to the aid of Pyongyang, even if it had wanted to. Meanwhile, the Yeltsin government's sharp rejection of the Communist Party and its appeals for Western aid left no room for accommodation with hard-line Stalinists in Pyongyang. The impact of the shift could be seen most dramatically in the changing direction of bilateral trade with the North, which fell to less than \$100 million by 1995.⁸ By contrast, Soviet/Russian trade with South Korea rose from \$290 million in 1988 to \$3.2 billion by 1995.⁹ Talk abounded during this period of grandiose plans for Russo-South Korean cooperation in major deals to develop natural gas in Yakutia and in other projects, including a planned pipeline from oil fields near Sakhalin Island to South Korea and an industrial park in the anticipated Nakhodka free economic zone.

However, even as trade expanded, the seeds of eventual problems in the Russian-South Korean relationship had already been sown. With the rapid decline of the Russian economy, Moscow soon found itself unable to begin repayment of its share of the \$1.8 billion loan that South Korea had provided to the Soviet Union. Because the funds had already been spent for the purchase of South Korean manufactured goods, the Yeltsin government was left to deal with the building interest on the loan.¹⁰ Lacking resources, the Russian government delayed the provision of necessary documents of financial responsibility to Seoul, although it finally agreed to pay back 70 percent of the Soviet-era loan (once a barter arrangement was accepted by South Korea). Even so, Russia missed several payments in 1992 and 1993, leading to an eventual freezing of South Korean assistance.

Meanwhile, for Seoul, the tremendous instability in the Russian economy and political system had begun to temper its initial enthusiasm for expanded investment in major projects. Projects such as the Svetlaya timber deal in Primorskiy Krai had ground to a halt because of bureaucratic disputes, inadequate surveys by South Korea, and Russian resistance to opening large protected forests to new logging.¹¹ South Korean companies began to turn to more reliable partners in other post-Soviet states, particularly in Central Asia. Part of the attraction of investing in Central Asia was a desire to provide at least symbolic assistance to the significant local Korean minority in many of those states, the adopted homes of some 300,000 members of the Korean diaspora dating from Stalin's exile of Russian Far Eastern Koreans in 1937.¹² Thus, while Korean electronics and other manufactured goods flooded the Russian market, much-needed investment funds moved into countries such as Uzbekistan (where Daewoo began to manufacture light trucks and automobiles for the post-Soviet market).

The period of growing Russian disenchantment with its South Korean partners culminated in the signing of the U.S.–North Korean Agreed Framework in October 1994.¹³ This agreement, backed also by the South Korean and Japanese governments, represented the formal exclusion of Russia from international negotiations on a settlement of the Korean Peninsula crisis. It also terminated the

Russian Ministry of Atomic Energy's hopes of eventually resuming the nuclear deal it signed with North Korea in 1985 but had frozen in 1992 because of non-payment by the North Korean side.¹⁴ More important, however, the snubbing of Russia by the United States, North Korea, and South Korea signified the weakness (if not irrelevance) of Russian interests on the Peninsula, despite decades of engagement and alliance with the North. This event triggered a strong response in the Russian Foreign Ministry and on the Russian political scene more generally, as old-time Asian specialists and newly respectable Russian Communists began to call for reexamination of Russia's "abandonment" of Pyongyang. Given the rising debt of the Russian government to the South and the failure of promised investment schemes to pan out, the Yeltsin government had few arguments for continuing its one-sided policy of siding with Seoul against the Stalinist North. In the increasingly de-ideologized Russian Foreign Ministry, ironically, the *strategic* significance of North Korea had begun to outweigh the widely recognized negative aspects of its political and economic system.

Balancing North and South—Dilemmas of Dual Engagement (1995–98)

The factors leading to the shift in policy in 1994–95 can be traced to developments at a number of levels. Beyond the strategic rationale outlined above, two other developments in the Russian political scene strengthened the forces for a change in Russian policy. First, the return of Communists to plurality control of the Russian Duma after the December 1995 elections brought in a new constituency for North Korean ties. These new representatives were motivated by anti-Western sentiments and a nostalgia for an era when Soviet largess bought friends and influence in various regions of the world. Members of this group in the State Duma, such as Liberal Democratic Party of Russia leader Vladimir Zhirinovskiy and Communist Duma Speaker Gennadiy Seleznev, called for renewing economic and even military relations with Pyongyang. Second, desperate enterprise managers and energy officials (especially in the Ministry of Atomic Energy) had exhausted their search for new markets and had begun to think again of old partners. To support their claims, these officials noted that only through renewed ties could Russia hope to convince Pyongyang to make good on its Soviet-era debts, which totaled \$4.32 billion for foodstuffs, machinery, nuclear technology, and armaments provided in the years prior to 1988.¹⁵

Another key force pushing for a rapprochement with Pyongyang, however, came from a different source altogether: regional politicians in Russia's Primorskiy Krai (on the North Korean border). Ironically, Primorskiy Krai Governor Evgeniy Nazdratenko's campaign against illegal Chinese workers, and his personal war with Moscow over the proposed return of certain border regions to China in the early 1990s, led him to begin looking for new sources of cheap labor for his region. North Koreans, whose strictly controlled brigade workers represented little threat of defection, represented a promising resource for a regional governor more concerned with his own political struggle with Moscow than about human rights. Small numbers of North Korean workers had continued to work in forestry and agriculture, and Nazdratenko wanted to increase their numbers. For Primorskiy Krai, which had

been the source of 72 percent of North Korean trade relations in the past,¹⁶ the possibility of renewed ties with its erstwhile ally offered at least the hope of new economic activity in a region battered by the failed process of reform, out-of-control transportation costs, and a lack of investment capital.

On 15 November 1994, the Foreign Economic Committee of North Korea and the Primorskiy Krai government signed an agreement creating the North Korean General Society for Foreign Construction (Zenko).¹⁷ The document proposed dozens of possible projects, including North Korean assistance in the construction of a twenty-five-story office tower across the Golden Horn harbor overlooking the center of Vladivostok. Further projects in a variety of fields were considered by delegations from North Korea that visited Khabarovsk in January 1995 and Vladivostok in March 1995.¹⁸ As one Russian Far Eastern analyst argued on the broader rationale for renewed regional ties with North Korea, "if one thinks from the perspective of counting on the inevitability of the creation of a unified Korea and the geopolitical situation of the southern portion of Primorye, then the necessity of reviving and deepening multifaceted ties with Pyongyang becomes perfectly obvious."¹⁹

Despite this flurry of activity, however, the place of North Korea in the Russian Far East could not be easily resumed. The key difficulty was the large amount of private and state funding coming from South Korea into the region, which had already begun to shift local interests and loyalties sharply toward the South. Throughout the region, South Korean investment had quickly replaced previous educational, social, and economic ties with the North. South Korean-funded social organizations (such as the State Cultural Center of the Republic of Korea in Vladivostok) offered free instruction in Korean to all comers; the family of a wealthy South Korean industrialist who had lived in the Krai during the Japanese occupation had funded and built a new Eastern Institute (the so-called Korean College) as part of the Far Eastern State University,²⁰ and the region's largest and most prestigious construction project (Hyundai's hotel and business center in downtown Vladivostok) had begun to turn the heads even of Nazdratenko's own local officials. Moreover, South Korean organizations were not eager for Russians in their employ to renew contacts with North Koreans, any of whom could be North Korean agents.²¹

Throughout the early 1990s, the continued presence of the North Korean trade office in Khabarovsk and the North Korean consulate in Nakhodka provided a ready venue for expanded participation under the new agreements. Thus, the Russian Far East became a surrogate battleground for the North-South conflict. In fall 1996, it was in Vladivostok that North Korea chose to retaliate for South Korea's efforts to hunt down the crew members of a North Korean spy submarine that had broken down in South Korean waters, resulting in the brutal murder of a South Korean consulate member on the steps of his apartment. Witnesses who saw persons leaving the scene indicated that the perpetrators were Asians, not Russians, lending credence to widespread belief that this was a killing ordered by Pyongyang.²² Local authorities, despite obvious leads, have failed to turn up the culprits.

At the national level, Russo–North Korean relations have moved ahead largely on the weight of trips by Russian Communist Party leaders and others nostalgic for the old days. Despite its dire economic condition, moreover, North Korea continues to host lavish receptions and conferences in Moscow to promote *juche* ideology among sympathetic Russian academics, government officials, and Duma representatives.²³ Typical of the views of this pro–North Korean lobby is that of one Russian analyst who criticizes the United States for starting what he calls the “propaganda campaign which invented the story of a North Korean atomic bomb.”²⁴ Duma supporters of North Korea have been even more vocal on the “wrongs” of the earlier pro–Southern policy, making wildly optimistic claims of a potential for \$3 billion in bilateral trade and calling for the two countries to unite “in the struggle for socialism and against reaction.”²⁵

In this political context, the Yeltsin administration is still struggling to define the new relationship with Pyongyang. After rejecting the old Treaty on Friendship and Cooperation of 1961 and its outdated military clauses (which together expired in 1996), Moscow has yet to sign a new agreement with North Korea. In January 1997, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister for East Asia Grigoriy Karasin visited Pyongyang to discuss the issue, but without results.²⁶ Negotiations were continuing as of early 1998. This suggests that the Yeltsin government is wary of embracing Pyongyang as of old, but does not want to reject Pyongyang’s overtures.

Other Russian politicians show fewer restraints. An example was the October 1997 visit of senior Russian Communist Party official Oleg Shenin to Pyongyang. In an honor not bestowed to his Yeltsin government colleagues, Shenin became the first foreign leader to meet personally with North Korean leader Kim Jong Il since the latter’s trip to Beijing in 1983.²⁷ This suggests that North Korea remains interested in returning a Communist government to power in Moscow, however unrealistic that may seem. Other interests in Moscow’s defense industries and nuclear industry would perhaps welcome such ties, but it is unclear who—besides the Russian government—can provide funding for renewed economic relations. The only current Russian arms sales to the North are said to be limited to spare parts for Soviet-era weapons and are said to be conducted on a cash basis.²⁸ More troubling is the state of regional affairs, where local officials have moved quickly to reengage North Korea, despite a number of risks.

Russian–North Korean Regional Ties

Given the presence of some 19,000 to 20,000 North Korean workers in the Russian Far East,²⁹ it is difficult for regional authorities to keep track of the infiltration of security agents from the North. In the past two years, the local press has been filled with accounts of North Korean arrests. In January 1996, seventeen North Koreans contracted to a Russian fish processing enterprise were caught by Russian authorities trying to infiltrate a Pacific Fleet submarine facility fifteen kilometers from where they should have been.³⁰ Other North Koreans have been caught trying to purchase information from Russian sailors and shipyard workers about submarine dismantlement work and the patrol schedules of active duty submarines. These incidents show that North Koreans view their access to Russia as a means of obtain-

ing sought-after goods and technology. By smuggling highly enriched uranium submarine fuel from a Russian facility, for example, North Korea could acquire the materials for a nuclear weapon. Similarly, the illicit purchase or theft of dismantled missile components from a submarine could be used to extend the range of North Korean missiles. Thus, the attraction of North Korean laborers comes with a cost in terms of policing their activities.

In April 1997, for example, a translator attached to a North Korean agricultural brigade in Artyom (near Vladivostok) received a five-year sentence for possession of two-and-a-half kilograms of opium.³¹ In another case in August, in Khabarovsk, a forty-two-year-old North Korean cook, who had been working at a wood processing

enterprise, was sentenced to six years in prison for drug trafficking and possession of three kilograms of opium.³² It is unlikely that these individuals—given the highly controlled conditions in the North Korean camps—were acting on their own initiative. Indeed, in November 1996, Russian border guards found twenty-three kilograms of pure opium on a rail-

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car on its way from Pyongyang to Moscow, suggesting direct government involvement in this trade.³³ More troubling is the fact that Russian officials have only recently gained access to North Korean labor camps after a revision of the intergovernmental timber agreement in 1995. The new agreement provides for inspections by local Russian authorities as well as boosting the Russian share of the ventures to 61.5 percent (from 43 percent under the old agreement).³⁴ Thus, while local officials can claim that the relationship is better than in the past, serious problems remain. It is unclear what effect a new twice-a-week direct airline service from Pyongyang to Vladivostok, beginning in August 1997, might have in worsening the situation.³⁵

Another problem in Russo–North Korean relations is the tendency of local government officials and—even the local Russian press—to fall into past patterns of socialist-era behavior. On the eighty-fifth anniversary of Kim Il Sung’s birth in spring 1997, for example, the newspaper *Vladivostok* ran an unedited statement praising the legacy of the Stalinist leader, the text of which had been provided by the North Korean consulate in Nakhodka.³⁶ In July 1997, the Russian Pacific Fleet’s newspaper, *Boevaya Vakhra*, published a three-column essay praising Kim Il Sung’s ideas on the third anniversary of his death, again using material provided by the North Korean consulate.³⁷ In September 1997, moreover, *Vladivostok* published a glowing, whitewashed history of North Korea on the forty-ninth anniversary of the establishment of the North Korean state, once more drawing on the same source.³⁸ Although these patterns may seem relatively harmless, they continue to provide false information and slanted information to the local Russian population.

Other patterns of complicity bear much more serious implications. There are many indications that Russian government officials have been involved in the forced repatriation of North Korean citizens seeking asylum in Russia. In one case, two workers from a group of three were retained on the Russian side of the border after guards witnessed the first returnee being shot by soldiers after crossing back into North Korean territory.³⁹ These events have led to official protests by the South Korean government, but similar deportations are still likely to be taking place, as Russian officials seek to avoid causing trouble for themselves in protecting asylum seekers from the North.

Recent Developments with South Korea

Despite the new emphasis in Russian policy on renewing ties with Pyongyang, in the past two years the Russian government has made several overtures aimed at stabilizing and building on its relations with South Korea. Most importantly from the perspective of Seoul, it has moved actively to begin paying the debts owed to South Korea through barter deals involving Russian supply of military equipment (T-80U tanks, Iгла anti-aircraft missiles, and Black Shark helicopters), enriched uranium for South Korean nuclear reactors, and other metals.⁴⁰ After stalled talks during 1995–96, the two governments also agreed during Russian Foreign Minister Evgeniy Primakov's visit to Seoul in July to move ahead with an exchange of land in their respective capitals for the construction of embassies. In addition, the South Korean government reaffirmed its commitment to assist in building an industrial park in Nakhodka and to participate in the construction of a Russian-Korean Trade Center in Moscow.

A major development within the region has been the long-awaited opening of Hyundai's modern, twelve-story business center and hotel complex in downtown Vladivostok. The project's rapid, twenty-month construction—after years of political obstacles—represented a symbolic victory for South Korean business efforts to establish a firm foothold in the Russian Far East. It also provided a humbling lesson to Russians familiar with decade-long domestic construction projects. One newspaper reporter began a radiant description of the new building with the almost reverent phrase, “according to old-timers, such speeds of construction took place before the Revolution.”⁴¹ Another article spoke of the project as a “step into the 21st century.”⁴² These recent developments suggest that North Korea's progress with the Primorskiy Krai government and large state enterprises have not necessarily swayed public opinion in the Far East. The success of the business center may go a long way toward cementing respect for the South and adding further momentum for the growth of mutually beneficial economic ties.

On another level, the Russian Far East is being sought after by South Koreans as an anchor for their own future policies after reunification. Notably, a new South Korean joint venture to cultivate rice in the Russian Far East had as its stated eventual goal the reduction of South Korea's dependency on American-grown rice. Although the venture is a small one, and the statement largely symbolic, the fact that its founders equated this regional project with broader international issues

implies that regional developments in “Russian Asia” between the two Koreas are not without influence on broader Russo-Korean relations.

Caught in the Middle—Russia’s Korean Minorities

In the midst of the simmering North-South struggle for influence in the Russian Far East, four distinct groups of ethnic Koreans have become involved, whether willingly or not. The uncertainty of current Russian policy has added new tension to their relationships both with each other and with the governments involved in this triangular power play.

The first group consists of Chinese nationals of Korean descent who flooded (many illegally) from Northeast China into the Russian Far East in search of economic opportunities. Many of them still cling to native Korean practices and are more comfortable speaking Korean than Chinese. This sizable new minority (estimated at several tens of thousands) has been singled out by Russian Far Eastern authorities, who view them as a nuisance at best and as a threat at worst. So-called Chinese markets have been shunted into distant suburbs, away from the centers of key cities, and harassment of traders by local officials is common. To date, however, little has been reported in the press regarding contacts between these ethnic Koreans and either their North or South Korean brethren, although such ties are undoubtedly being formed.

A second group consists of the approximately 40,000 Koreans from the Pusan region sent by the Japanese as forced laborers to Southern Sakhalin (then a part of Japan) during World War II.⁴³ Despite the passage of time, these elderly refugees still consider themselves Korean, and many speak Japanese better than they do Russian. Although they were offered North Korean citizenship after 1948, few emigrated to the North because of their Southern roots. In a strange twist of historical fate, they were not granted Soviet citizenship and now have to apply to acquire Russian citizenship. During the Soviet period, their children had to marry Russians in order to become citizens. Today, however, the offspring of the original group and their children make up a sizable Russian-Korean minority in the region. These individuals are now returning to Korean culture and are benefiting from opportunities to learn Korean, and in some cases, visit South Korea. While the 7,000 remaining first-generation Koreans still express a desire to return to their homeland, very few can hope to collect enough funds for such a move before their deaths.⁴⁴ Their children, by contrast, see themselves mainly as “Russian.” Despite their refugee heritage, the Sakhalin Koreans have largely usurped the place of the region’s traditional Korean minority, the deported Far Eastern Russians now in Central Asia. The Sakhalin Koreans, who suffered a similar (but slightly later) deportation from their homeland, have recently benefited from the attention of South Korean social organizations. They can be expected to play a continuing role in supporting South Korean ties to the region and in resisting future inroads by Pyongyang.

A third group consists of approximately 16,000 Far Eastern Koreans who have returned from the diaspora in Central Asia.⁴⁵ Although still a small community, this group has been among the most assertive in seeking to return to what it views

as its rightful place in the Russian Far East. Because of their departure from Korea in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (especially after the Japanese occupation) those who still speak Korean use an older dialect than that of more recent emigrants. In addition, unlike others, they do not see return to Korea as a goal, but rather view the Russian Far East as their homeland. Although officially “rehabilitated” in the early 1960s, by 1991 only about 8,000 had succeeded in moving back. Since 1991, however, an additional 8,000 have returned. The Krai administration is supposed to assist them in relocating, but has not provided any help (according to local Russian-Koreans). Ironically, some local farming areas (such as Ussuriysk) are attempting to assist returnees because of the excellent reputations Korean-run *kolkhozy* achieved in Central Asia.

Some returnees are also working for South Korean companies. There are even bigger plans to resettle Koreans in the region if the South Korean industrial park in Nakhodka is finally built. But many offspring from this group admit being confused about their rightful place.⁴⁶ Those in

“Russia’s current policy of dual engagement with the two Koreas has a conflictual present and an uncertain future.”

Uzbekistan, for example, have lived there all of their lives, have local spouses and children, and have no knowledge of the Russian Far East. Also, because of the Soviet breakup, they no longer possess Russian citizenship. Finally, most simply lack the funds to move. Thus, the hurdles to their return are growing over time, suggesting that the Central Asian Koreans are not likely to increase their presence in the Russian Far East much beyond their current numbers.

A fourth and final group consists of the approximately 10,000 North Korean laborers working in various joint ventures, enterprises, and logging camps in the Russian Far East. Although many are believed to be serving in work brigades in Russia under duress, a few who have spoken with journalists say that they came to Russia either to make money or to escape even worse living conditions at home.⁴⁷ The group currently supports North Korean policy, replete with its seamier side: drug smuggling, passing counterfeit foreign currency, and other crimes. It provides Pyongyang with a powerful fifth column in support of its activities in the Russian Far East, as long as it can be kept under control. In a future crisis situation in North Korea itself, however, the group could become an unpredictable force in the Russian Far East, with individuals and small groups switching to Southern loyalties, trying to claim asylum, or turning to criminal activities using their existing channels. Alternatively, in a situation of continued control by the government in North Korea, this growing force of itinerant laborers moving back and forth across the border could begin to bring disruptive foreign ideas into the society, eventually promoting change (or even rebellion). Thus, these workers could become a double-edged sword from point of view of Pyongyang.

These scenarios, and their unpredictability, worry some analysts in the Russian Far East. Given the mass emigration of Koreans to the region during the Korean Peninsula famine of the 1860s (when more than 500,000 sought residence on the still very wild Russian frontier), fears of a future, uncontrollable mass of North Koreans streaming across the border raise serious concerns.⁴⁸

The existence of this and other Korean ethnic groups shows that regional developments are likely to have a continuing influence on Russo-Korean relations at the national level. Depending on future circumstances, the groups could play a stabilizing role in supporting national trends or a disruptive one in complicating or contradicting those policies.

Conclusion and Policy Considerations

Russia's current policy of dual engagement with the two Koreas has a conflictual present and an uncertain future. Although backed by Moscow's pro-North Korean lobby and by conservative officials in the Russian Far East, the rapprochement with the North is viewed with caution by many Russian reformists, as well as some individuals within the Foreign Ministry. The findings of this study suggest that both sides of the argument are backed by certain justifiable goals but that a finer line is needed in order to chart a favorable course for Russian policy. The means for achieving such a policy would be to craft a *consensus* that will enable Russia to satisfy those dual interest groups and still ensure that the current two-track policy does not remain just that: two policy lines that run parallel but never meet. As shown above, the contradictions between the two are likely to entail serious long-term problems for Russia, leading to foreign policy inconsistencies and even to open disputes among elites. For those reasons, it is worthwhile to weigh the arguments of both sides more carefully to determine what means might exist to bridge the existing gap between the pro-northern and pro-southern policy lines.

One point raised by the pro-Pyongyang lobby is the fact that other states in the region—such as China—have good relations with both countries. Southern supporters make the point instead that North Korea is a bankrupt state, with irrational (and even dangerous) political leaders, and that Russian policy should shun those relations and not risk worsening ties with the South.⁴⁹ In considering the two positions, it can be observed that—in comparison with the Communist leadership in Beijing—Moscow has a much smaller political stake in preserving the current regime in Pyongyang. Indeed, Russia has many reasons to want to move the process forward, for both economic and broader, geostrategic reasons. To date, neither Japan nor the United States has recognized the North, largely because of Pyongyang's continued failure to live up to its commitments to engage the South in negotiations toward reunification. At the same time, however, Russia borders North Korea and cannot deny that it has unique interests in maintaining some ties. But engaging the government in Pyongyang also entails risks, given Russia's weakened ability to control its borders and internal affairs. Thus, while agreeing with the point that dual engagement may make sense for Russia, the findings presented above suggest that Russia needs to do more to define the parameters of

such a policy, rather than letting it be dictated by Pyongyang. On what basis might Russia develop such guidelines?

Given Russia's political instability and still-evolving democracy, existing evidence suggests that Russian policy should place a priority on ensuring that cooperation with Pyongyang does not destabilize its ongoing reforms. In this regard, Russian policy would seem to be well served by making it clearer both to officials in Pyongyang and to conservative Russian regional leaders that the Russian government will not accept a return to old-style relations, propaganda, or illegal North Korean behavior. While reversion to old patterns might help Russia regain influence in Pyongyang and reap certain short-term financial benefits, it would clearly work against Russia's long-term interests. Instead, Russian policy would be strengthened by putting relations with Pyongyang on a new footing, using (when necessary) its right to deport diplomats, inspect North Korean joint venture facilities, and in general, show that nonideological international relations do not mean abandonment of Russian principles or international commitments.

Given these considerations, a useful theme for a new, more effective Russian policy of dual engagement might be to press the North for "positive" engagement: that is, tempering Russian cooperation with progress in Pyongyang's relations with the South. This would also involve reining in illegal North Korean activities in the Russian Far East and linking investment projects to progress in North Korean economic reform. Such a line would involve punishing North Korea when it failed to play by the rules. If pursued carefully but resolutely, this policy would serve Russian interests better when the two sides of the Peninsula eventually begin to move toward reunification. By contrast, a policy that engages North Korea according to the old rules, as suggested by some Russian conservatives, will lead to a contradictory and fragmented Russian policy in East Asia and to possible setbacks in relations with the South, as well as potentially with the United States, Japan, and even China. (It was in part for these reasons that Russia was excluded from the four-power talks in the first place.)

According to these guidelines, possible attempts by North Korea to revert to its isolationist path and to draw Russia back into closer ties (particularly in case of future North Korean confrontations with the International Atomic Energy Agency) need to be firmly resisted by the Russian government. Instead, the new policy must make clear that Moscow will put its principles of foreign policy (and international treaty commitments) first and judge North Korean behavior accordingly. In the end, closer ties with a Stalinist regime are simply not in Russian interests, unless they are highly conditional and bring meaningful commitments of change on the part of Pyongyang. Russia's goal of dual engagement *is* worth pursuing, but only if Moscow can make it clear to North Korea that it intends to play according to new rules.

NOTES

1. N. Ye. Bazhanova, *Vneshne-ekonomicheskie svyazi KNDR: b poiskakh vykhoda iz tupika* (Moscow: Nauka Press, 1993), 68.

2. For more on the history of Soviet-Korean nuclear relations, see Alexandre Man-

sourov, "The Origins, Evolution, and Current Politics of the North Korean Nuclear Program," *Nonproliferation Review* 2 (Spring-Summer 1995).

3. Natalya Bazhanova, "North Korea's Decision to Develop an Independent Nuclear Program," paper presented at a conference on Problems of Security in Northeast Asia and the North Korean Nuclear Question, 2 December 1995, Russian Diplomatic Academy, Moscow.

4. Vasily V. Mikheev, "Russian Policy towards [the] Korean Peninsula after Yeltsin's Re-election as President," *Journal of East Asian Affairs* 11 (Summer/Fall 1997): 357.

5. For more on these debates, see James Clay Moltz, "Commonwealth [CIS] Economics in Perspective: Lessons from the East Asian Model," *Soviet Economy* 7 (October-December 1991): 357-59.

6. See Vladimir F. Li, "Russia's Far East in Contemporary Russian-Korean Relations," in *Politics and Economics in the Russian Far East: Changing Ties with Asia-Pacific*, Tsuneo Akaha, ed. (London: Routledge, 1997).

7. V. Yakubovsky, "Economic Relations between Russia and [the] DPRK: Problems, Perspectives," *Korea and World Affairs* (Summer 1996).

8. L. V. Zabrovskaya, *Rossiya i Respublika Koreya: ot konfrontatsii k sotrudnichestvu (1970-1900-e gg.)* (Vladivostok: Institute of History, Archaeology, and Ethnography of the Peoples of the Far East, 1996), 12.

9. *Ibid.*, 45.

10. On the debt issue, see *ibid.*, 57-59.

11. Tsuneo Akaha, Pavel A. Minakir, and Kunio Okada, "Economic Challenge in the Russian Far East," in *Politics and Economics in the Russian Far East*, 61-62.

12. This figure includes the increase of the Korean population from the offspring of the original 167,000 deported to the region. On the exile of Russian Far Eastern Koreans by Stalin to Central Asia, see B. D. Pak, *Koreytsy v Sovetskoy Rossii (1917-konets 30-kh godov)* (Moscow and Irkutsk: Russian Diplomatic Academy, Irkutsk State Pedagogical Institute, and the International Federation of Korean Associations, 1995), 227-41.

13. Selig Harrison, "The North Korean Nuclear Crisis: From Stalemate to Breakthrough," *Arms Control Today* 24 (November 1994).

14. Georgiy Kaurov, "A Technical History of Soviet-North Korean Nuclear Relations," paper presented at a conference on Problems of Security in Northeast Asia and the North Korean Nuclear Question, 2 December 1995, Russian Diplomatic Academy, Moscow.

15. "NK's Foreign Debts Reach \$11.5 Bil. In '95," *Korean Times*, 18 May 1996, 2 (NAP-SNet Daily Report, 20 May 1996).

16. Interview with Alexander Kislitsyn, Vladivostok academic specialist on North Korea, Institute of History, Vladivostok, 27 January 1996.

17. "Koreyskie stroiteli otkryvayut predstavitel' stvo," *Vladivostok*, 8 September 1995, 2.

18. Interview with Alexander Kislitsyn.

19. Gennadiy Syromyatnov, "Rossiya i KNDR: segodnya i zavtra," *Krasnoe Znamya*, 12 July 1995, 1.

20. Interview with Vyacheslav Lee, president, Vladivostok Social-Cultural Center of Koreans, Vladivostok, 25 January 1996.

21. One local Russian-Korean (name withheld) confirmed this point in an interview with the author in Vladivostok in January 1996, noting that a former North Korean contact frequently pressed her for information about her South Korean employers.

22. Andrey Ostrovskiy, Vladimir Oshchenko, Dmitriy Khabalov, "Ubiytsa koreyskogo diplomata byl v futbolke i rezinovykh perchatkakh," *Vladivostok*, 17 October 1996, 5.

23. *DPRK Report* (Institute for Contemporary International Problems, Moscow) 7 (May-June 1997).

24. See "Russian Appraisals of U.S. Policy towards North Korea," in *DPRK Report* 5 (January-February 1997).

25. *DPRK Report* (September-October 1996).

26. Interfax, 29 January 1997.

27. Associated Press, 4 October 1997, citing ITAR-Tass report of 2 October 1997; in NAPSNet Daily Report, 2 October 1997.
28. Institute of World Economy and International Relations, Russian Academy of Science, *Evolutsiya struktur voennoy bezopasnosti: rol' i mesto Rossii* (Moscow: Russian Humanitarian Fund, 1997), 101.
29. G. Ya. Levchenko, "Vneshneekonomicheskaya deyatel'nost Rossii na Koreyskom poluostrove," in *Aktual'nyy problemy Koreyskogo poluostrove* (Moscow: Institute of the Far East, 1996), 56.
30. NTV (Moscow), 30 January 1996; in FBIS-SOV-96-022 (30 January 1996).
31. For the original report on the crime, see "Tovary iz Severnoy Korei: opiy, geroin i t.d.," *Vladivostok*, 20 September 1996, 2.
32. At the time of his arrest, the cook was in possession of \$2,000 in cash. On the incident, see V. Kolodyzhniy, "Koreyskiy povar osvoil balandu," *Tikhookeanskaya Zvezda*, 6 August 1997, 1.
33. Vladimir Semiryaga, "This Year's Largest Drug Batch Intercepted on Russian-Korean Border," *Ria Novosti*, 6 November 1996.
34. *Segodnya*, 11 March 1995, 3.
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36. "85-letie presidenta Kim Ir Sena," *Vladivostok*, 15 April 1997, 14.
37. "Idei Presidenta Kim Ir Sena ostayutsya dukhovnym bazisom," *Boevaya Vakhta*, 5 July 1997, 8.
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39. AFP (Tokyo) "Two North Koreans Held by Russia," *Moscow Tribune*, 28 May 1996, 5.
40. "Moscow Renews Korean Deal," *Wall Street Journal*, 5 August 1996, A15.
41. Andrey Ostrovskiy, "'Khende' raspakhivaet dveri," *Vladivostok*, 25 July 1997, 1.
42. Vladimir Oshchenko, "Ambitsiozniy proekt Hyundai vo Vladivostoke—eto shag v XXI vek," *Vladivostok*, 4 September 1997, 5.
43. The author thanks Vladivostok resident Nina Kim, a Sakhalin-Korean whose parents were deported from Pusan in 1943, for providing information on this group of local Koreans. Personal interview in Vladivostok, January 1996.
44. See Lucy Jones, "Forgotten Prisoners," *Vladivostok News*.
45. Interview with Vyacheslav Lee.
46. Interview with Irina V. Alekseeva, a third generation Uzbek-Korean, Tashkent, Uzbekistan, August 1997.
47. Andrey Kalachinskiy and Yuriy Mal'tsev, "Koreyskie stroiteli shtukaturyat fasad Vladivostoka," *Vladivostok*, 10 July 1997, 9.
48. On this topic, see "Golodnykh severnikh koreystev v Primor'ye ne pustya," *Vladivostok*, 6 May 1977, 1.
49. See, for example, Mikheev, "Russian Policy towards [sic] Korean Peninsula."