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**COOPERATION BETWEEN RUSSIA AND CHINA IN NORTHEAST ASIA:
PARTNER OF CONVENIENCE OR RELIABLE ALLIANCE?**

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Abstract. *After the end of the Cold War, the international order shifted to a U.S.-led unipolar system. As the U.S. hegemony has strengthened, the cooperation between Russia and China has also been reinforced. Based on common principles and norms, Russia and China are challenging the US-led world order, attempting to build a multi-polar system. Historically, Northeast Asia has been a stage of great power politics, and the alliance structure of the Cold War era still exists due to the strategic competition between U.S. and China in this region. Russia and China are closely aligning in Northeast Asia and this enables them to meet their strategic interests in this region. At the same time, however, some possibilities of rupture between the two states also exist.*

This study analyzes Russo-Chinese cooperation in Northeast Asia. Based on this, an attempt was made to examine the latent conflicting factors that could drive a wedge between the two states. The author argues that Russia and China have built a cooperative relationship against the U.S.-led unipolar system. As the U.S. factor was the catalyst for restoring and strengthening Russia-China relations, it could also serve as the biggest variable in Russia-China relations in the future.

The author also insists that even though Russia and China are currently parallel in their response to regional security issues against the U.S.- such as the North Korean nuclear issue, the U.S. missile defense deployment issue, and territorial disputes, divergence among the fundamental interests clearly exist. China, as an absolutely advantageous partner of North Korea, would want to maintain the status quo on the Korean peninsula. On the other hand, Russia aims to develop multilateral cooperation with Northeast Asian states and enhance its influence over the region. Therefore, Russia seeks gradual change in this region.

Keywords: Russia, China, U.S., Northeast Asia, alliance, Korean peninsula

КООПЕРАЦИЯ МЕЖДУ РФ И КНР В СЕВЕРО-ВОСТОЧНОЙ АЗИИ: УДОБНЫЕ ПАРТНЁРЫ ИЛИ НАДЁЖНЫЕ СОЮЗНИКИ?

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Аннотация. *С усилением гегемонии Соединённых Штатов крепло и сотрудничество между Россией и Китаем. Особенно в Северо-Восточной Азии, где сохраняется конфигурация блоков времён холодной войны из-за стратегического противостояния США и КНР. Тесное сотрудничество позволяет России и Китаю реализовывать свои стратегические интересы в этом регионе. Предпринимается попытка проанализировать сотрудничество России и Китая в СВА, исследуются различные факторы конфликта, способные «вбить клин» между двумя государствами.*

Ключевые слова: Россия, Китай, США, Северо-Восточная Азия, альянс, Корейский полуостров

With the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, the international community has undergone structural changes, establishing a unipolar order led by the United States.

For Western scholars and politicians, the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union meant «the end of history» and it appeared that the value system to replace democracy and capitalism is either not effective or no longer exists. The end of the bipolar order led the European region to the path of integration and cooperation. European countries worked towards integration and cooperation based on a common value system, economic interdependence, and the development of multilateral organizations, such as NATO, the EU, the OSCE.

Despite these changes in the international community, the regional order created in the era of the Cold War within Asia-Pacific region still remains, and competition and conflicts among those states are intensifying. The Asia-Pacific region is witnessing a bifurcation between a 21st century economic order geared towards economic globalization and integration, and, on the other hand, a regional security order with an increasingly sharp, nationalist and almost 19th century orientation. Some have called this the «Asian Paradox» [1].

America's attempts to strengthen its alliance network and deploy a missile defense (MD) system in East Asia, China's military modernization and armament expansion, territorial disputes among states, North Korea's nuclear and missile development, and Japan's attempts to revise their constitution and to develop its military strengths are examples of the political reality. This indicates that economic interdependence does not guarantee cooperation in the fields of politics, diplomacy, and security, at least in East Asia.

In Northeast Asia, particularly, the old confrontation structure between the two axes that consist of the U.S., South Korea, and Japan competing against and Russia (USSR), North Korea, and China, respectively, still remains. Undoubtedly the U.S.-China competition is located at the center of this conflict. Since the mid-1990s, as China emerged as a global powerhouse beyond the regional level on the basis of rapid economic growth, the strategic competition between the U.S. and China has intensified. The U.S. global strategy has clearly been developed with the aim of restraining China's influence, and as a result, East Asia has become the area where China's global strategy, the One Belt One Road initiative, collides with the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy.

In order to realize the Indo-Pacific strategy, the United States have strengthened its traditional Asian alliance network with nations such as the Republic of Korea, Japan, and Taiwan, which inevitably entails the restoration and reinforcement of Russia-China cooperation. The North Korean nuclear program, which is the main security issue in the region is aligned with this alliance system and today the region is witnessing the old regional architecture in Northeast Asia between two triangles, consisting of the U.S.-South Korea-Japan and China-North Korea-Russia.

Needless to say, these two triangles resonate greatly with each other, and they are redefining the contours of Northeast Asia [2]. However, the «Russo-Chinese alliance» framework - as mentioned above, sometimes it extends to the framework of a trilateral alliance that includes North Korea - tends to be accepted indiscriminately not only in South Korean society, but also in international society. However, the 30-year long North Korean nuclear crisis clearly shows that such a Cold War perspective and approach does not help to establish peace in Northeast Asia.

Therefore, the reasons to examine the Russia-China relations can be summarized as follows:

First, if we accept the «Russo-Chinese alliance» framework without any hesitation, it would lead to dichotomous thinking stemming from the Cold War era - only friend or foe would remain. Even worse, if this structure is considered as a «constant» in the regional order, the scope of thinking narrows, which could hinder productive discussions for foreign policy making and would seriously undermine the national interests of the Republic of Korea.

Second, the Russo-Chinese alliance framework simplifies the complexity of the North Korean nuclear problem. The North Korean nuclear issue is entangled with a variety of interests of concerned states in Northeast Asia, hence, the Republic of Korea needs cooperation from China and Russia to resolve this problem peacefully. If we focus on «splitting teams» without understanding each state's interests, long-term visions, or policies and strategies, the settlement of the North Korean nuclear issue will remain unresolved.

Third, if we do not properly understand Russo-Chinese relations, we will not be able to take full advantage of the opportunities for bilateral cooperation with China and Russia respectively in realizing the «Korean peace process» and the «New Northern Economy» initiated by the Republic of Korea.

With such recognition, this study aims to analyze the cooperation between Russia and China from an objective observer's perspective. This study explores the drivers of Russo-Chinese cooperation, as well as potential impeding factors, focusing exclusively on the Northeast Asia region. Based on this, the author attempts to answer the questions of whether or not it can be defined as an «alliance», and whether it could be developed into a reliable alliance in the future.

RUSO-CHINESE COOPERATION IN NORTHEAST ASIA

Northeast Asia has been an arena of rivalry between sea powers and continental powers since the late 19th century. The Sino-Japanese War in the late 19th century and the Russo-Japanese War in the early 20th century were conflicts between a continental power (China and Russia) and a sea power (Japan). Even after the end of World War II, competition between the U.S. and Soviet Union continued in this region.

As I suggested earlier, the main axis determining the regional order in Northeast Asia at this moment is the United States and China, and these global superpowers each represent sea and continental powers. Amid fierce competition between the U.S. and China, Russia and China are bolstering their ties, pursuing their national interests strategically. Russo-Chinese cooperation stands out, especially in the three issues presented below.

NORTH KOREAN NUCLEAR PROBLEM¹

The North Korean nuclear problem is arguably one of the critical issues where Russian and Chinese policy converge. The congruence of their perception over the North Korean nuclear issue can be summarized as follows:

¹ For more details refer to the article «Sino-Russian relations on North Korean nuclear issue» published in the scientific journal «Obshchestvo: politika, ekonomika, pravo». 2020, № 4(81), pp. 50-53 (In Russ.). This chapter is partially supplemented and revised.

First, Russia and China support denuclearization and peace on the Korean Peninsula, and therefore, the nuclear power status of the DPRK cannot be recognized.

Second, both Russia and China perceive North Korea's nuclear weapons as a threat to their national security. However, their concern has more to do with the consequences caused by North Korea's provocations, rather than anxiety over the possibility of North Korea's preemptive strike targeting Russia and China. Russia and China believe DPRK's nuclear program is not aimed at their country, and they view the fundamental reason for the nuclear development of North Korea as the result of a lack of security guarantees from the international community [3].

However, concerns have been growing in Russia and China because North Korea's provocative behavior and possession of nuclear weapons could trigger the development of a series of nuclear weapons programs in Northeast Asia, such as in South Korea and Japan. In addition, the North Korean nuclear program provides an appropriate reason for strengthening the ROK-U.S.-Japan military alliance, as well as maintenance and expansion of U.S. troop levels in the region and the deployment of a U.S. missile defense system in East Asia.

Third, Russia and China stand together to support the preservation of the «Kim dynasty» in North Korea. More precisely, they surely desire to maintain strategic and geopolitical stability in Northeast Asia by preserving the North Korean regime. Since Russia and China share borders with North Korea, they can't help but worry about the possible confusion and instability caused by contingencies in North Korea, such as the influx of refugees or the contamination of nuclear testing sites that might destabilize their border regions.

China, especially fears the contingency that could entail North Korea in a conflict with America, and if it the situation deteriorated, China could lost its «buffer zone» with South Korea, which is allied with the U.S.

In sum, both Russia and China recognize that the North Korean regime needs to be maintained in order to manage its border areas and buffer zone, and this should be a prerequisite for the process of resolving the North Korean nuclear program.

Both Russia and China are pursuing the following policies toward the North Korean nuclear issue based on the above three perceptions. First, they support a peaceful method through multilateral conversations and diplomatic negotiations in settling the nuclear crisis. Russia and China have urged North Korea to halt its nuclear development, demanding states in the region that «North Korea's nuclear development should not be an excuse to strengthen their own military power, especially nuclear capability».

In 2017-2018, Russia and China reinforced their cooperation to resolve the nuclear crisis on the Korean peninsula, especially after President Trump stated the possibility of military intervention and pre-emptive strikes against North Korea. In a joint statement in July 2017, the Russian and Chinese governments proposed a «roadmap» containing a comprehensive and step-by-step solution to the nuclear problem [4]. This joint initiative was significant in that it marked the first joint position that the two countries had taken on an international issue [5]. Subsequently, in April 2018, Wang Yi, the Chinese Foreign Minister, proposed the establishment of a security mechanism in Northeast Asia in the wake of a meeting with the Russian Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov [6].

The diplomatic solution to the North Korean nuclear issue aims at not only the stability of the North Korean regime, but also preventing the U.S. from making unilateral policy decisions. Also, both Russia and China could project their influence and secure their own interests through multilateral mechanisms involving all of the relevant countries in Northeast Asia.

Second, Russia and China criticize the level and method of economic sanctions imposed by the international community on North Korea. Therefore, Russia and China are supporting Kim's regime by adopting a strategy to sustain economic relations with North Korea while partially implementing economic sanctions. Russia and China insist that as North Korea has expressed its commitment to denuclearization and has taken its first steps toward denuclearization, sanctions should be eased.

Third, Russia and China commonly resist U.S. unilateralism in resolving the North Korean problem. In particular, they strongly condemn the discourse of America's possible military intervention. Military cooperation between Russia and China, which was remarkably enhanced after Trump's threat of pre-emptive military strike against North Korea, proves the policy convergence between the two states.

MILITARY COOPERATION

The Russia-China partnership in the military sphere also deserves attention. Military cooperation between the two states has accelerated since the North Korean nuclear crisis in 2017. For instance, in April 2018, Chinese Defense Minister, Wei Fenghe, visited Russia on his first overseas trip as defense minister. Wei Fenghe stated that the reason he chose Russia as his first visit was «to show the U.S. the level of military cooperation between China and

Russia» [7]. They not only showed off the level of military ties to the United States, but also officially expressed their willingness to cooperate with each other on global affairs.

The joint military exercises between Russia and China are also noteworthy. In September 2018, Russia conducted «Vostok-2018», the largest military exercise since the Cold War era, in which the Chinese military participated. While most of the joint military drills between Russia and China have been conducted within the framework of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), «Vostok-2018» was not an international military drill, but a domestic Russian military exercise. In this regard, this was unprecedented, inasmuch as Russia invited foreign troops from a non-Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) member state to its strategic exercise for the first time [8].

Russia and China have clearly shown their rejection of the U.S. and U.S.-centered alliances in Northeast Asia, utilizing joint military action. On May 3, 2018, two Russian aircraft entered the ROK Air Defense Identification Zone (KADIZ), which was a part of a Russian-Chinese military exercise conducted from April 29 to May 4. In July and August 2019, again, Chinese and Russian bombers and reconnaissance planes entered the KADIZ. These episodes imply a Russian-Chinese aligned challenge to the U.S. and U.S. alliance system in this region.

TERRITORIAL DISPUTES

Russia and China have maintained neutrality on border disputes and territorial issues that are viewed as crucial by the other. However, Russia, while retaining a position of formal neutrality, clearly considers China's claims more favorably. For instance, Russian statements regarding the disputed territories of the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands on the 40th anniversary of the war against Japan have begun to echo Chinese positions. Also, the dominant narrative in the Russian media supports China's view of the territorial dispute as stemming from Japanese expansionism and portraying Japan as the interloper rather than the legitimate holder of the territory [9].

Several important actions by Russia and China appear to be coordinated with an aim to apply pressure on Japan, as well as other countries involved in territorial disputes with Russia and China. During the first ever Sino-Russian joint air patrol in the Asia-Pacific region in September 2017, conducted over the East Sea/Sea of Japan and the East China Sea, the Russian patrol not only intruded into the KADIZ, but also entered the Japanese Air Defense Identification Zone, prompting the Japanese Self-Defense Force to scramble jets to confront it. Allegedly, such scrambles have become increasingly frequent against both Russia and China in recent years. There were 999 such dispatches in 2018, a third of them against Russia - mostly in the skies around the northern half of the Japanese archipelago - and two thirds against China - mostly in the south around Okinawa, where the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islands were an obvious flashpoint [10].

In June 2016, the contiguous waters of these islands also became the target of a maritime intrusion by Russian and Chinese military vessels [11]. This was the first case of a Chinese military vessel invading the contiguous zone of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. Although the two countries insist that their joint military drills do not assume countering any third countries, their military alignment has posed a threat to the Japanese side.

As for the territorial dispute between Russia and Japan, it is more complicated. Even though they have territorial conflict, Japan perceives Russia less of a threat than China and has expectations that it would play a role as a counter-balancer between Russia and China. In fact, both Russia and Japan have agreed on the need to resolve conflicts over the Kuril Islands and conclude a peace treaty. However, it is likely that the current situation will continue without any progress, considering the opposition from conservative forces in Russia, the solid alliance between the U.S. and Japan, and the geo-strategic value of the Kuril Islands.

China's strategic interests in the Kuril Islands are also significant. When Chinese ships use the route through the Soya Strait (La Perouse Strait) to get to the Arctic Ocean, they have to sail across the Kuril Islands, through Paramushir or the contested islands of Etorofu and Kunashir. These islands are thus expected to become more influential as they are part of a zone located within current shipping routes to the Arctic [12].

Furthermore, considering the fact that China is gradually expanding its naval forces to the Western Pacific region, it is strategically advantageous for China to keep the Kuril Islands under Russian control. When Chinese ships access the Pacific Ocean, Chinese ships outside the Yellow Sea must travel around the Korean peninsula, cross the East Sea/Sea of Japan, and then pass through the Soya Strait between Sakhalin and Hokkaido. If China tries to find another route in case the relations with Japan (or U.S.) deteriorate, the only way left must be the Kuril Islands. Therefore, Russia is likely to consider Chinese interests of the Kuril Islands as well as its own national interests, as they continue to deepen their ties.

OBSTRUCTIVE FACTORS AND POSSIBLE OPTIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

Despite the fact that Russia and China are currently parallel in their response to the regional security issues examined above, this doesn't mean that the interests and approaches of the two states perfectly coincide.

In particular, divergence in their fundamental interests stands out on the Korean Peninsula. As we discussed earlier in this article, Russia and China have taken a common stance on the North Korean nuclear issue. More precisely, however, the North Korean problem can be divided into two parts: (1) the nuclear issue, (2) North Korean reform and its opening up to the international community. When it comes to North Korean reform and opening up, it would drive a wedge between Russia and China.

As is well known, China already dominates the North Korean economy and politics, and therefore, it would prefer to maintain the status quo on the Korean peninsula, preserving its privileged status. If the current situation persists, China could easily absorb North Korea into the Northeast Asian order envisioned by China and use it as a buffer against U.S. and South Korea. Even though the need for the re-establishment of relations with the DPRK has been addressed in Chinese political society for a quite long time, Beijing apparently prefers to use North Korea as a useful card in its strategic competition with the United States.

Russia, on the other hand, needs a gradual change of the current situation to meet its geopolitical interests and promote economic cooperation with Northeast Asian countries, simultaneously. Russia has been aiming to develop East Siberia and its Far East region by cooperating with Northeast Asian states and enhance its influence over the region. It is true that China also places great emphasis on regional cooperation with North Korea for the development of the Northeastern provinces of Liaoning, Jilin and Heilongjiang. Nevertheless, Russia's eagerness to develop its Far East is far more than just economic benefit, because it is essential for Russia to gain influence in East Asia.

Therefore, Russia would be more in favor of flexibility and gradual change on the Korean peninsula to the extent that its own security interests are not impeded. Russia is also eager to build a multilateral order in this region, not a hegemonic order by either the United States or China [13].

These divergences in their viewpoints presumably stem from asymmetry in the influence they have in Northeast Asia. China defines itself as a superpower in Northeast Asia. While Russia, considering its influence in this region, can be defined as a second-rate power and is rather restricted in their ability to maneuver.

Apart from the North Korean factor, the American factor also should be pointed out. As the U.S. factor was the catalyst for restoring and strengthening Russia-China relations, it would also serve as the significant variable in future relations between Russia and China. In other words, Russia-China cooperation is likely to change depending on what kind of bilateral relations would be formed with the U.S. by Russia and China, respectively.

In the midst of the North Korean nuclear crisis in 2017, Zhu Feng, a leading Chinese academic, wrote in «Foreign Affairs» that China faced three options with respect to its North Korea policy: (1) working more closely with the U.S. to impose sanctions, (2) reluctantly and partially enforcing sanctions, or (3) reinforcing its partnership with Russia and using North Korea as leverage in relations with the U.S. and South Korea [14]. Until recently, after North Korea's sixth nuclear test in 2017, China's policy toward North Korea has actually shifted between these three options.

China seeks to resolve the North Korean issue within the framework of U.S.-China relations. In other words, Beijing could utilize the North Korean issue to both improve relations with Washington and obtain concessions from Washington.

Meanwhile, this possibility is also open to the Russian side. Although U.S. attempts to drive a wedge between Russia and China have not been effective due to the deterioration of U.S.-Russia relations, Russia may prefer to utilize the U.S. card when they seize the opportunity in order to reduce its dependence on China.

In order for a political relationship to be officially defined as an «alliance», official documents must be signed between the concerned states, especially within the military and security fields. In this regard, the Russian-Chinese relationship cannot be defined as a full-fledged, formal alliance, because they have not explicitly stipulated any alliance commitment in their New Friendship Treaty, which was concluded in 2001. However, considering Stephen Walt's argument that «many contemporary states are reluctant to sign formal treaties with their allies» [15], it is possible to broaden the meaning of «alliance» and apply it to Russia and China relations. Albeit not in the formal form like NATO or other U.S. Asian alliances, Russia and China are satisfying a set of standards for alliance - willingness to cooperate in the international arena, and taking similar positions on key issues [16].

Presumably, as long as U.S.-Russia and U.S.-China relations continue to deteriorate, the Russo-Chinese alliance will continue to evolve and develop. However, as mentioned above, Russia-China relations would seriously be affected by how Russia and China absorb and overcome the U.S. factor.

In addition, the future of Russo-Chinese cooperation in Northeast Asia will be determined by how Russia and China overcome the asymmetry of interests and coordinate policy between the two countries.

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