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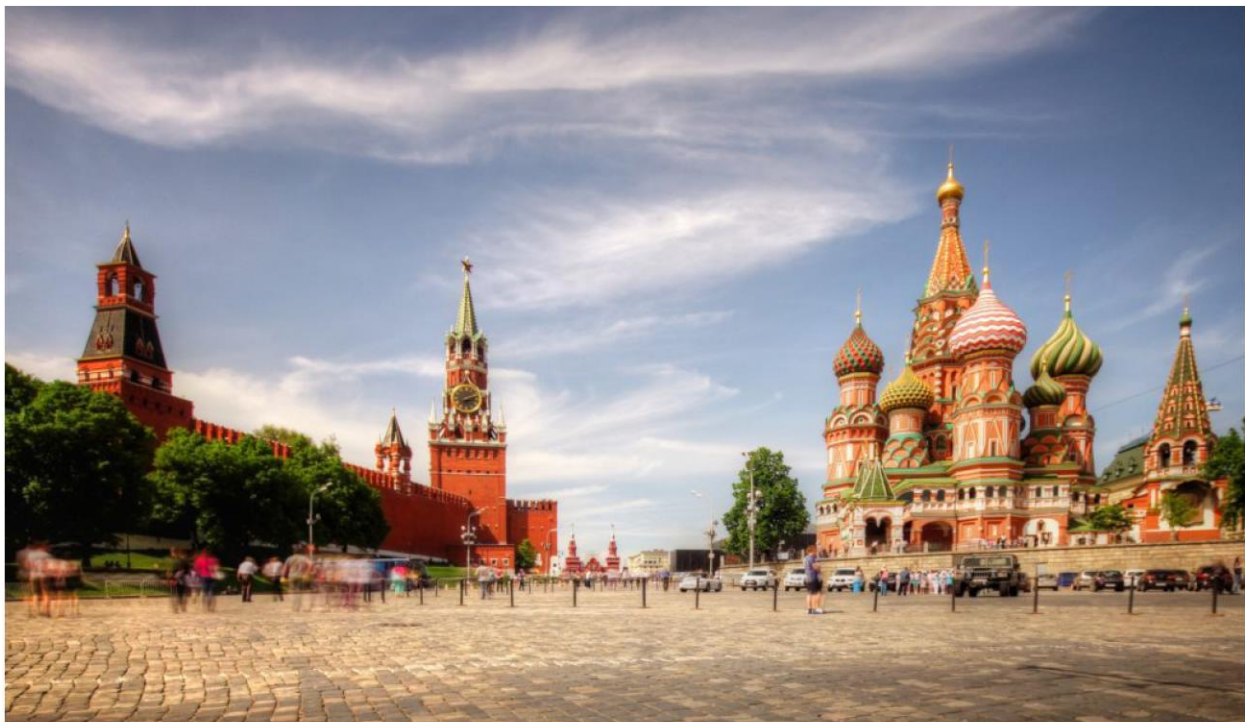
THE PENIN

Russia's DPRK Policy during the Biden Administration: Same Dream, Different Beds

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Author: [James D.J. Brown](#)

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Despite President Joe Biden's previous description of Russia as an "opponent" and the regime of President Vladimir Putin as "KGB thugs", it remains possible for Washington and Moscow to cooperate where strategic interests align. This was demonstrated by the extension of the New START Treaty, an agreement that was reached within days of the Biden administration taking office. North Korea is another issue on which the United States and Russia, in principle, share the same goal of denuclearization. And yet, irreconcilable differences between the methods favored ensure that North Korean policy will remain an area of contention — and not cooperation — between the Biden and Putin administrations.

Some might assume that what the U.S. government describes as Russia's "worldwide malign activity" extends to Korea, and that Moscow would like nothing better than to see the failure of U.S. efforts to achieve denuclearization on the peninsula. Yet, this is to do Moscow a disservice.

As one of the three states with a land border with North Korea, Russia has a real interest in reducing tensions and ensuring stability. A conflict or the uncontrolled collapse of the North Korean regime could have serious implications for Russia's Maritime Territory (*Primorsky Krai*). There are also persistent fears that a misguided DPRK missile or a nuclear test gone wrong could have negative spillover effects for Russian territory.

For this reason, Russia welcomed President Donald Trump's summits with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un in 2018 and 2019. From Moscow's perspective, Trump's engagement policy was disorganized and poorly implemented, but it was still a step in the right direction. Specifically, the Kremlin was pleased with Trump's effective acceptance of the "freeze-for-freeze" proposal long advocated by Russia and China. That is, a freeze on U.S. and South Korean military exercises in exchange for a freeze on North Korean missile and nuclear testing.

Russia is waiting to learn what emerges from the Biden administration's review of policy towards DPRK, yet they are already preparing to be disappointed. Above all, if the Biden team's approach sees a suspension of high-level engagement with Pyongyang, combined with a re-emphasis on sanctions and a resumption of large-scale military exercises with South Korea, this will be viewed as a dangerous mistake.

Although Russia's leaders would ideally like to see Pyongyang relinquish its nuclear weapons, they do not believe that this can be achieved in the short run. Moscow also takes the view that denuclearization cannot be pursued through sanctions since these only increase Pyongyang's insecurity and force the North Korean leadership to cling to its nuclear arsenal more desperately. As Putin put it in 2017, "They would rather eat grass but will not give up the [nuclear] program if they do not feel safe."

Instead, Russia proposes a long-term approach that would seek to create a new reality for North Korea. Rather than maximizing pressure, this entails maximizing the sense of security for the isolated country. Such a strategy would not generate instant results, yet Moscow believes that, if confidence-building efforts were to persist and the North Korean

leadership were to feel the results, some progress towards denuclearization could follow within a decade.

More concretely, Russia proposes that this new reality be created through steps in three areas. First, sanctions on North Korea should be reduced. As noted, Moscow does not believe that these are effective, not least because the Kim regime has become adept at living with such measures and their impact is seen as falling mainly on the wider North Korean population.

Second, military exercises between the United States and South Korea should be suspended. Ideally, this should apply to large and smaller scale drills alike, and should be formalised as lasting a fixed amount of time. Such a moratorium would lower the Kim regime's sense of existential threat and reduce tensions, especially because North Korea fears that such exercises could be used as cover for a military strike.

Third, the Russian leadership would like to see a resumption of high-level engagement with DPRK since they argue that only a diplomatic solution is possible. This should involve both face-to-face meetings with the North Korean leadership and the avoidance of belligerent rhetoric. While this might initially entail U.S.-DPRK meetings, it will need to be broadened since, in Moscow's view, only the support of multilateral structures can ultimately provide the level of the security that North Korea would need in order to forego its most destructive weaponry.

Needless to say, Russia is also mindful of the ways in which these three steps would serve its own national interests. For instance, a lessening of sanctions could bring economic benefits, not least if a lifting of restrictions were to permit North Korean migrants — who are valued for their low wages and high-quality work — to return to construction sites in the Russian Far East. Meanwhile, a suspension of U.S.-ROK military drills would have the added benefit of devitalizing ties between the United States and a key ally, something that is one of Moscow's most enduring strategic goals. Lastly, a resumption of Six-Party Talks would be consistent with Russia's projected self-image as a country without whose involvement no major international problem can be resolved.

A mere glance at this list of Russian priorities is sufficient to show that, no matter what the specifics of the Biden administration's eventual policy towards North Korea, they are likely to be incompatible with Moscow's favored approach.

There are many international issues on which Russia and the United States disagree on the desired outcome. With North Korea, by contrast, leaders in Moscow and Washington share the same distant dream of a stable and nuclear-free Korean peninsula, yet their proposed starting points from which this goal should be pursued are far apart. Under the Biden administration, these irreconcilable differences will come to the fore again when Pyongyang launches its next provocation, as it surely will, in the months to come.

James D.J. Brown is associate professor of Political Science at Temple University, Japan Campus, in Tokyo.

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