
Abstract

US policy towards North Korea will be impacted by the deterioration of relationship between North Korean and the Russian Federation since the end of the Cold and the subsequent USSR collapse. This study is of past and contemporary East Asian history within the context of the four traditional elements of a national power (DIME) – Diplomatic, Information, Military and Economic. An alliance between Russia and North Korea does not serve Russia’s diplomatic, information, military, or economic interest. Therefore, the Russian Federation is unlikely to support North Korea in response to international pressure. US policy coercing North Korea is highly unlikely to illicit a Russian retaliation. Therefore, analysis supports the continuation of America’s current policy of increasing pressure towards North Korea.

Overview

The relationship between North Korea and the Russian Federation has deteriorated significantly after the fall of the Soviet Union. Today, an alliance with North Korea does not serve Russia’s diplomatic, information, military, or economic interest. Therefore, the Russian Federation is unlikely to support North Korea in response to international pressure. Consequently, American policy coercing North Korea is highly unlikely to illicit a Russian retaliation. Therefore, this analysis supports the continuation of America’s current policy towards North Korea.

This paper is designed to inform American policy makers on contemporary Russo-North Korean relations examining the likelihood of a Russian response to American policies against North Korea.

The end of the Cold War terminated the association North Korea enjoyed with the Soviet Union. The current strength and nature of the relationship between the Russian Federation and the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea is unclear. Clarifying Russia’s military, economic, and political interest with North Korea gives American diplomats a decision advantage.

1 A latter version of this paper was presented as “North Korea: The Sick Man of Asia – An Analysis of the Slow Decline of the Democratic People’s Republic” at University of New Mexico (UNM) National Security Studies Program (NSSP) and Global National Security Program Symposium 4 April 2017.

2 A decision advantage is when policy makers are provided with intelligence that allows policy makers greater confidence in their decision. Lowenthal, Mark M. Intelligence: From secrets to policy. CQ press, 2014. Pg 258
Historical Context

One major point of disputes in the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905) was the status of Korea. Japan wanted to annex Korea. The Russian Empire was concerned that Korea’s annexation would threaten Russia’s interest in China. The Russo-Japanese war would end one year later in an overwhelming Japanese victory. Japan would annex Korea just four years later.

America’s involvement in the Korean War threatened the survival of the Soviet Unions’ buffer state (North Korea). The Soviet Union provided North Korea with military subsidies and technical knowledge3. However, the Soviet Union never supported North Korea through direct military action. The Korean War is an important case study for two reasons. First, the Soviet Union was willing to spend a large amount of limited resources supporting North Korea. Second, Soviet support had a limit. The Soviet Union was unwilling to go to war with the United States, a super power, over Korea.

The Russo-Japanese War and the Korean War tells us two things about Russia’s long term foreign policy with Korea. First, Russia does have interest in Korea that they are willing to protect with military force. Second, Russia’s interest in Korea are not strong enough for Russia to fight a super power.

Diplomatic Interest

Russia’s relationship with North Kora does not significantly benefit Russia. However, by giving North Korea, a Chinese ally, support Russia can theoretically improve Sino-Russian relations. Improved Sino-Russian relations is vital for the future of the Russian Federation. Recent sanctions placed on Russia by the European Union and the United States forced the Russian Federation to find new markets for its raw materials4. The most appealing market for Russia is China. In 2013 China imported 37 billion dollars of Russian goods5.

Russia needs to export crude petroleum, refined petroleum, and petroleum gas. China needs these good to feed its rapidly growing economy Even though this relationship is mutually beneficial there are barriers to strengthening relations between Russia and China.

The relationship between China and the Russian Federation is not dependent on Russia support for North Korea. Therefore, Russia is unlikely to support North Korea as a strategy to improve Sino-Russian relations. Consequently, American policy makers can work in conjunction with Russia on North Korea without the fear of deteriorating Sino-Russian relations.

Information Interest

North Korea does not have any significant information assets that the Russian Federation needs. For example, one of North Korea’s major exports is ballistic missile technology. The Russian Federation can produce ballistic missile technology domestically. Therefore, the demand for information from Russia for information from North Korea does not exist.

The role of North Korea’s increased use of Cyber and how it affects Russo-North Korean relations is still to be determined.6

Military Interest

The expansion of NATO is concerning to Russia. Russia’s primary concern is defending the western Russian Core7. This investment of military resources in the west makes it unlikely that Russia will devote limited military resources in the east. Therefore, the Russian Federation is very unlikely to participate in a second Korean conflict involving the United States.

Nuclear Interest

The Russian Federation has a significant nuclear arsenal along with the means to deliver them i.e. missile, submarines, and aircraft.8 North Korea’s limited arsenal and unreliable delivery systems do not contribute to Russia’s nuclear capabilities. Furthermore, North Korea’s nuclear arsenal destabilizes Russia eastern border. The North Korean nuclear program offers no benefits while threatening to disrupt the stability of Northeast Asia.

Economic Interest

In 1988 the Soviet Union was North Korea’s main trade partner.9 Sixty percent of the goods North Korea imported came from the Soviet Union. The relationship between the two nations was not mutually beneficial. The Soviet Union was essentially giving North Korea

---


subsidies. Furthermore, the normalization of relations between the Republic of Korea (South Korea) and the USSR further complicated subsidies to North Korea. Moscow had to consider how its association with North Korea would affect Soviet-South Korean relations.

Trade between North Korea and Russia declined with the fall of the Soviet Union. In the 1990’s, North Korea went through a period of isolation. In the late 2000’s, the amount of trade between North Korea and Russia increased slightly. In 2013 North Korea imported $103 million worth of Russian goods. It is important to note that trade with North Korea is a tiny portion of Russia’s $507 billion dollars of exports in 2013.

Russia’s economic relationship with North Korea is improving slowly over time. However, the current relationship between Russia and North Korea is very weak.

Conclusion

In recent years, there has been a marginal improvement in Russo-North Korean relations. However, Russia does not gain any significant diplomatic, information, military, or economic advantage with improved Russo-North Korean relations. The weakness of Russo-North Korean relations gives the United States a decisive advantage. The United States should continue its current policy of pressuring North Korea without concern of a Russia retaliation.

Works Cited


Works Referenced

