Russia and China in the Korean Peace Process

Trilateral talks were held in Moscow on October 9, 2018 between Russia, North Korea and China. The meeting brought together Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Igor Morgulov, North Korean Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs Choe Son-hui and Chinese Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs Kong Xuanyou, and has been an important step in developing a common strategy that coordinates the three countries' efforts. The participants agreed that the only way to resolve the Korean nuclear problem would be through diplomacy and political negotiation, and made an appeal, saying that the efforts North Korea (DPRK) is making need to be encouraged by partially easing the current sanctions.

This event has paved the way for further cooperation between the three countries to maintain the status quo on the Korean Peninsula, to address North Korea's nuclear program by relying only on diplomacy and political negotiation, and to try and get other parties to acknowledge the steps North Korea has already taken. On November 1, 2018, Permanent Representative of the People’s Republic of China to the United Nations, Ambassador Ma Zhaoxu, highlighted the UN Security Council Resolution that outlines ways in which sanctions on the DPRK could be eased, and reiterated the shared position of Russia and China, which is that the denuclearization process should be supported by lifting sanctions in parallel.

There was a spike in activity aimed at bringing about denuclearization ahead of the DPRK–United States Hanoi Summit and after it concluded with ambiguous results on February 28, 2019.

On February 20, 2019, Russian Ambassador to the UN Vasily Nebenzya told reporters that Russia sees a need for the partially lifting sanctions against the DPRK, in order to stimulate denuclearization in the country: "We believe that the delivery of humanitarian aid to North Korea needs to be supported, we believe economic stimulation is the right approach to take, and this may require lifting sanctions, at least partially."

On March 4-5, 2019, US Special Envoy for North Korea (DPRK) Mark Lambert visited Moscow. It was also in March 2019 when DPRK Vice Foreign Minister Im Chon-il met with Russian Deputy Foreign Ministers Igor Morgulov and Sergey Vershinin in Moscow to share their thoughts on how to bring peace and security to the Korean Peninsula.

A few days after this meeting, on March 18, 2019, South Korea’s Special Representative for Korean Peninsula Peace and Security Affairs Lee Do-hoon, met with Russian Deputy FM Igor Morgulov. The South Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs reported that "Lee Do-hoon's visit is part of Seoul's efforts to continue to cooperate closely in coordinating their North Korean policy with the international community," and views were also exchanged at the meeting regarding the situation on the Korean Peninsula in light of the North Korea–United States Hanoi Summit.

US Special Representative for North Korea (DPRK) Stephen Biegun arrived on a visit to Moscow on April 17-18. The official purpose of the visit stated by the US State Department was to discuss the complete, verifiable, and irreversible denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula and to explain the reasons why talks with Pyongyang have collapsed after the Hanoi Summit. This trip was one of a number of overseas visits Biegun made in March — he visited China from March 24 to 27, where he also discussed measures which could be taken to achieve denuclearization in North Korea.

On April 18, Biegun met with Russian Deputy FM Morgulov for talks. The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs reported that "a detailed exchange of views took place on the current situation around the Korean Peninsula. It has been established that there is a mutual desire to continue making active efforts and moving in this direction, in cooperation with all parties involved, in the interest of finding a political and diplomatic settlement to resolve the problems in the subregion as soon as possible."
The meeting between the two diplomats was constructive, with a discussion which examined a number of aspects where the US and Russian stances on North Korea overlap, and they expressed their commitment "to continue their dialogue to bridge any gaps on the way forward." Judging by what has been reported, Biegun failed to convince Moscow to step up the sanctions.

On April 24, 2019, the administration of South Korea’s presidential office announced a plan to hold top-level talks on security-related issues with Russia at the end of April, around the same time when North Korean leader Kim Jong-un had planned to hold a summit with Russian President Vladimir Putin. This was to be the fifth security-related meeting, with the most recent of these types of sessions held in Moscow last June.

On April 25, South Korea and Russia engaged in talks on security-related issues in Seoul. The Head of South Korea’s National Security Agency Chon Yi Yong and Secretary of the Security Council of Russia Nikolai Patrushev represented the two countries at the talks. Nikolai Patrushev said he was confident that the North Korean-Russian Summit which was held in Vladivostok would provide the impetus for negotiations to denuclearize the Korean Peninsula.

South Korean President Moon Jae-in met with Nikolai Patrushev on the same day. Moon Jae-in noted that planned cooperative action between Russia and China should be talked over to an adequate degree with the United States, and expressed his hope that the summit which was held in Vladivostok would help boost the denuclearization process and revive the dialog between the DPRK and the United States.

On April 19, Press Secretary for the President of Russia Dmitry Peskov told reporters that there has not been any coordination between Russia and the United States on the issue of denuclearizing the DPRK, although views are being exchanged on the matter. At the same time, he said Russia will make every effort to support the process of denuclearizing the Korean Peninsula.


On May 7, 2019, the Director of the North Korean Nuclear Affairs Policy Division of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of South Korea Chun Yeon-doo and the Russian Foreign Ministry's Ambassador-at-Large Oleg Burmistrov held the latest in a series of talks in Moscow. The Russian side acknowledged Seoul's efforts to develop inter-Korean relations and said that the South Korean side should play a key role in resolving regional problems, according to the Russian Foreign Ministry. Chun Yeon-doo met with Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Igor Morgulov on the same day.

At a joint press conference with Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi on May 13, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said that the entire Korean Peninsula should be denuclearized. "We are doing our best to promote the type of dialog that is based on ... a staged approach, reciprocity, transparency, and what I mean by this is of course that denuclearization should apply to the entire Korean Peninsula, not just the Northern part." The Minister also noted that in the summer of 2017 during a regular Russian-Chinese summit, Sergey Lavrov and Wang Yi signed a declaration containing the exact “roadmap” which provided a framework to structure talks which began taking place between the US and DPRK leaders. Lavrov went on to say that he hoped they would be able to reach a "comprehensive agreement both on the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula and on building a system of peace and security in Northeast Asia in general, including clear and rock-solid guarantees of security for North Korea," which Russia and China are prepared to help develop.

At the same time, Sergey Lavrov particularly emphasized the fact that the sides need to meet halfway. However, when Pyongyang took serious trust-building measures (the cessation of nuclear tests and ballistic missile launches, as well as closing its Punggye-ri Nuclear Test Site), the US and South Korea were only prepared to reduce the scale of military exercises.

On May 15, Sergey Lavrov and Mike Pompeo met in Sochi to discuss the situation on the Korean Peninsula. Speaking at a joint press conference after the meeting, Pompeo reiterated that US policy remains unchanged: to impose sanctions against Pyongyang until the final, fully verified denuclearization of North Korea is achieved. Sergey Lavrov, in turn, said that Russia is ready to support the dialog between Washington and Pyongyang, recalling that North Korea expects clear guarantees of security to be delivered in response to denuclearization, and that denuclearization should encompass the entire Korean Peninsula. "We are sure that ultimately we must strive to form a robust mechanism of peace and security in Northeast Asia."

The Ministers' speeches clearly expressed their diverging views on how to go about achieving denuclearization - Washington insists on continuing to enforce sanctions, while Moscow is in favor of easing UN sanctions in
On the same day, on May 15, a telephone conversation took place between Deputy Foreign Minister Igor Morgulov and US Special Representative for North Korea Stephen Biegun, initiated by the American side. An announcement on the Russian Foreign Ministry website notes that “the prospects were discussed for the development of the situation in the subregion and the steps which could be taken by all of the states involved in the settlement process in the interest of furthering the political and diplomatic process.”

Talks were held on May 17, when the Russian Foreign Ministry's Ambassador-at-Large Mr Oleg Burmistrov met with the US Special Envoy for North Korea Mr Mark Lambert. The American diplomat was also received by the Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Igor Morgulov, but judging by the reports which have been published, the outcome of the meeting boils down to an exchange of positions. “There was a detailed exchange of views on the current situation on the Korean Peninsula. We reaffirmed our mutual commitment to strengthening our coordinated efforts in both bilateral and multilateral formats, with the aim of promoting a political and diplomatic settlement on the Korean Peninsula.”

Thus, although the US is not willing to consider changing its position at this point, Moscow and Beijing continue to follow a common roadmap.

**Konstantin Asmolov, PhD in History, Leading Research Fellow at the Centre for Korean Studies of the Institute of Far Eastern Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences, exclusively for the online magazine “New Eastern Outlook”**