The Eurasian initiative by the President of South Korea

On October 18, 2013, in her opening speech at the International Conference on Cooperation in Eurasia, South Korean President, Park Geun-hye, proposed the so-called “Eurasian initiative.”

Such is an ambitious plan that would see a change in the fundamentals of the global economy, diplomacy and the geography of national security. Under the slogan of “one continent”, “creative continent”, “peaceful continent”, it raises the idea of the creation and development of South Korea with the countries of Eurasia by a single and unified system of transport, energy, trade networks, along with the implementation of economic cooperation and exchanges within the spheres of science, technology, culture, including at the level of interpersonal relationships, and thus improving inter-Korean relations based on trust.

Officially, based on this initiative, there is recognition of the fact that, in order for stable economic growth of South Korea to occur, it is necessary to develop cooperation with the states of Eurasia, states which are becoming increasingly more important and influential in the world. Promotion of this initiative is in full swing which makes it necessary to give a brief tutorial about what is behind the project and how it may hold particular interest for Russia.

According to the author, at the heart of the Eurasian initiative there are three not mutually exclusive motivations, and depending on the interpretation of the ideological bias, any of the three can be highlighted. Firstly, every president should have a legacy project, such as the “low-carbon green growth economy of Lee Myung-bak, regardless of how active and realistic such a project is to achieve.

Secondly, this project can be seen as a cautious attempt to secure a space for political maneuver similar to the “northern policy” of Roh Tae-woo. South Korea is not so much trying to get out from underneath the American umbrella, as it is seeking ways to reduce dependence on the U.S. by expanding its contacts within Europe. Here it is worth remembering that Pak Kin Hyo still doesn’t have the full support within the right trend, and thus is forced to act indirectly.

This applies to the development of relations with Russia (and with Europe in the future) as well as with the countries of Central Asia which Park Geun Hye visited in June 2014.

Thirdly, this project can be seen as another attempt to internationalize relations between North and South Korea so that Russia and other Eurasian countries who have an interest in creating a “united, peaceful and creative continent” begin to exert some pressure on North Korea, so that it too becomes actively involved in the integration process, understanding that by the “development of reform and opening up”, it sets the stage for preparing the integration of the North with the South.

However, it is the author’s opinion that the project hasn’t yet been fully developed. There are some slogans, sketches and ideas, but a clear program with established goals is yet to be defined, as shown by the comments and
interpretations of the various experts.

There is some disagreement with regards to the establishment of relations with North Korea in the first place. Some suggest that the first priority should be to strengthen investment, trade and humanitarian component, which would then contribute to the development of bilateral relations, and generally focus on the economy and not on politics. Others believe to artificially limit cooperation is a policy not worth pursuing. Economic cooperation should be linked to the political situation, and if possible, in the event of success, or a sign of weakness of the North, it should be moved from economic to political issues.

Also worth noting is the question of “Eurasia”. Does this concept only have geographical significance, or should it be more broadly understood? As Professor Soo Kyung Chung notes, the Korean view of the Eurasian boundary differs from that of Russia because it includes the Pacific Ocean. But even if we restrict it to the mainland, some commentators consider Eurasia in general, while others limit it to the countries of North-East and the Asia-Pacific regions, and others, especially within the former Soviet space, believe its region has taken on greater significance in light of the visit of Park Geun-hye to Central Asia.

Despite the fact that there may be some overlap between Russian and Korean interests, we should not fool ourselves into believing that the Korean side understands the concept of “Eurasia” in the same manner as Russia. This understanding may differ significantly from the “Eurasianism” in the sense it is promoted in Russia. I doubt that the Republic of Korea is familiar with the work of L.N. Gumilev, not to mention modern Eurasian theorists such as A.G. Dugin and others.

But if in the Russian discourse of “Eurasianism” or Eurasian values are perceived as an alternative to Western/universal values, in South Korea the term can be understood quite differently, within the paradigm of globalization as the spread of European values in Asia and the creation in the region not only of an energy and transport infrastructure, but of a values base.

In general, the initiative by Pak Geun-hye to some extent reflects the aspirations of previous presidents of South Korea, who dreamed of turning “Korean island” into an industrial and transport hub within the Asian wheel. The Prime Minister of the Republic of Korea, Jung Hong-won, on May 30, 2014, said his country hopes for the creation by the Asian countries of “an Asian era of peace and prosperity” on the basis of mutual trust and cooperation, for which cause the Republic of Korea will contribute to “the concept of peace and cooperation in the northeast Asia.”

Within this context, diplomats and experts from the Republic of Korea strongly welcome cooperation between our two countries. As the director of the Institute of Russian Studies at the University of Hankuk, Professor Hong Wan-suk, believes, the importance of Russia to South Korea goes beyond the problems of peace on the Korean Peninsula, but encompasses all of Northeast Asia. Cooperation with it will allow the Republic of Korea to recover some of its lost identity of the mainland by opening up access to the Eurasian space. Therefore, in the process of the transformation of the six-party talks within the regime of the multilateral security in Northeast Asia, Russia's participation must not be perceived as a "limitation", but just the opposite, “an opportunity”. A well-known Korean expert on the economics of Russia and the CIS, director of the U.S. and Canadian Studies dept., Europe and Eurasia at the Institute of Foreign Economic Policy of Korea (KIEP) Lee Jae-yong also assesses the prospects for projects as favorable, considering as the most promising areas of economic cooperation between Russia and South Korea the participation in the operation of the railway network from Rajin to Hassan, the construction of a gas pipeline from Russia to South Korea, South Korean companies participating in projects in Russia’s Far East and investment in special economic zones, which will be created in the Far East and Siberia. According to him, it would be beneficial for all parties. Russia could obtain the necessary additional capital and technology, North Korea would improve their economic situation, and the Republic of Korea “would invest in the development of the economy for a future unified Korea.” Lee stressed that “the central state” with which the development of cooperation within the framework of a “Trans-Asian initiative” is planned remains just Russia.’

South Korean researchers have repeatedly noted that the Eurasian initiative aimed at making the “South Korean island” a more integrated part of the continent is in sync with the eastern policy of Vladimir Putin directed at development of regional integration and the associated development of Russia’s Far East. In addition, it was hoped that the Eurasian initiative would help to prevent or mitigate any possible regional confrontation associated with the fact that in the face of the effects of the Ukrainian crisis two opposing blocs (Russia, China, North Korea - the U.S., Japan and South Korea) may arise in the region.

To sum up the author's opinion, the “Eurasian Initiative” of Park Geun-hye is aimed at regional integration and corresponds to Russian projects and proposals in this area. The latter can be clearly seen within the current situation
when, in a new round of tensions between Russia and the West, not only South Korea but even Japan has not rushed to join in on the U.S. initiated regime of sanctions against Russia, especially in those areas that can damage multilateral cooperation. And if Japan is currently supported in part by the United States, the Republic of Korea is still “undecided” and Washington is forced to take additional measures in order for Seoul to tow a closer line on U.S. policies. Moreover, a number of South Korean experts have openly stated that in this situation, the country should “pursue its own interests.”

No matter how the situation develops from here, such behavior by South Korea and its reluctance to change the course of its policies even after the Americans demanded it it is quite symptomatic.

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