How the region is making sense of a very different US president

Donald Trump’s shock election to the US presidency in November 2016 sent waves of uncertainty throughout capitals around the world about the future direction of US foreign policy. In Asia, leaders are coming to terms with what a Trump presidency could mean for the region, especially for hot spots such as North Korea and lingering tensions among Asia’s major powers.

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RUSSIAN EXPERTS had quite positive expectations on the prospects for Russia-US bilateral relations and their influence on regional politics following Donald Trump’s election in 2016. For example, dialogue on the settlement of the North Korean nuclear issue was seen as one of the possible areas of co-operation. Another expectation concerned Trump’s steps to improve relations with Russia as part of global competition with China. Some of his statements also signaled that US allies would have more freedom in their international relations, which fueled some speculation about better relations between Russia and Japan and South Korea.

The reality has turned out a bit differently. Russia-US relations keep worsening, caused partly by the trend of previous years, and is quite hard to reverse in the short term. Thus, Russia’s policy in Asia is mostly based on its long-term national interests and regional opportunities rather than expectations of a possible improvement in ties with Washington.

Russia’s top priorities in Northeast Asia include stability and security on its borders, but also international co-operation in the interest of economic development. President Vladimir Putin declared development of Russia’s Far Eastern regions as a national priority in the 21st century. The vast and very sparsely populated territory is located quite far from the country’s capital and requires huge financial resources for its development, as well as for successful integration with its East Asian neighbors.

After relations between Russia and Western countries — the so-called “Western front” —
worsened in 2014, “the eastern choice” in Moscow’s foreign policy became almost inevitable. Russian leaders are actively looking for more support and opportunities in the East, as Russians call Asia. The Russian economy has also gone through quite a bumpy period in recent years, with currency devaluation, contraction in the economy, a drop in external trade and a decrease in people’s real income. All of this has increased the importance of economic issues in Russia’s relationship with foreign countries. With the existing sanctions regime imposed against Russia by European countries, Russian business is looking for viable alternatives to Western trade partners and capital markets in the East, including with China, Japan and the two Koreas.

Russia and China: A Marriage of Convenience

According to the Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation, approved by Putin on Nov. 30, 2016,1 Russia views the strengthening of its position in the Asia-Pacific region, which includes Northeast Asia, as a strategically important direction of its foreign policy. One of the means to achieve this goal is “creating an inclusive, open, transparent and equitable collective security and co-operation architecture in Asia-Pacific.”

Put simply, Russia desires the establishment of a multipolar security and co-operation order in Asia where it can be one of the main actors.

Within this framework, Moscow sees it as important to develop a “comprehensive, equal, and trust-based partnership and strategic co-operation” with China. The two countries often share common approaches to key issues on the global agenda, and Russia regards this similarity as one of the core elements of regional and global stability. Personal factors have also contributed. The leaders of Russia and China have very good relations, as demonstrated in September 2017 at the BRICS summit when Chinese President Xi Jinping called Putin “my big friend.” Putin also saw “an unprecedented level of mutual trust” as the basis of bilateral interaction and called Xi “a good friend and a very reliable partner.”

One important arena for bilateral strategic interaction is the Shanghai Co-operation Organization (SCO), which is seen by both countries as an important institution for addressing regional security issues where the interests of the two powers overlap. This common ground has also contributed to the development of Russia-China collaboration on a broad variety of issues including resolving urgent regional problems such as the North Korean nuclear issue.

At the same time, Russia and China are not seeking a formal bilateral political and military alliance, as this would limit their independence in the international arena. Rather, they both seek a multipolar world and oppose actions that seriously change the security situation in Northeast Asia. For example, Moscow and Beijing both reacted strongly to the deployment of the US THAAD missile-defense system in South Korea, because they considered it to be a change in the strategic power balance that could speed up an arms race in the region.

The years 2014-2016 were marked by significantly expanded military and technical co-operation between Russia and China, which may even affect the strategic balance in Taiwan, the East China Sea, and the South China Sea, as the Chinese military gains access to more advanced weaponry.3 The most prominent examples of such co-operation are the sale of 24 Su-35 fighter jets and four S-400 Triumph air defense missile complexes to China.

Big economic deals are often signed during bilateral summits, and leaders personally monitor the progress of the most important projects. China provides a big market for Russia’s mineral resources, but Moscow is also pushing for trade diversification and more sophisticated forms of co-operation. Except for large-scale energy projects, such as the annual supply of 38 billion cubic meters of natural gas to China through the Power of Siberia pipeline starting from late 2019, Russia and China are expanding co-operation in such spheres as railroad infrastructure construction (the Kazan-Moscow high-speed railway), joint development of a long-haul wide-body aircraft and joint production of heavy-lift helicopters. Russia is currently Russia’s biggest trade partner, with bilateral turnover amounting to US$66.1 billion (or about 14 percent of Russia’s foreign trade) in 2016, more than the Commonwealth of Independent States (US$56.7 billion) or even Germany (US$40.7 billion). Despite these figures, the incredibly successful political interaction between Russia and China is not matched by a comparable level of economic co-operation. Bilateral economic ties are led by big state-owned companies and concentrated in large-scale projects rather than small- and medium-sized enterprises. A quick reorientation of Russia from European markets and capital providers to Chinese alternatives did not fully materialize, with the negotiation process turning out to be quite difficult for the Russian side. Chinese counterparts could not ignore Western sanctions and often demanded more favorable conditions and prices, which met Russian resistance.

The Silk Road Economic Belt — part of the Beijing-led Belt and Road Initiative — is seen as a new opportunity to expand regional co-operation. But some Russian experts regard it as a challenge for bilateral strategic ties, because it could conflict with Russia’s interests in strengthening its own position in Central Asia. Moscow and Beijing have been working hard to eliminate this risk and avoid unnecessary competition by proclaiming a connection between China’s Belt and Road mega-project and Russia’s Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) and the Chinese Belt and Road mega-project.4 But very few practical results have been achieved so far, and some Russian analysts believe China is trying to use economic instruments to engage the resource-rich Central Asian states in ways that threaten Russia’s efforts to re-integrate with them within the EEU.5 It is possible that if Russia-US and China-US relations deteriorated simultaneously, it could cause even more co-ordination between Russia and China in the international arena and on regional issues. However, the relationship with China is really independent of US-Russia relations. Even if Russia-US ties were to improve, Moscow would keep developing and deepening its strategic interaction with Beijing, because it corresponds with Russia’s long-term national interests, particularly with respect to the development of the Russian Far East.

Russia-Japan and Russia-South Korea: Economy First

In Russia’s relations with Japan and South Korea there are also some conflicting imperatives. On the one hand, Moscow has strategic interests with both, including addressing long-standing territorial issues, solving the North Korean nuclear problem and developing closer economic ties. However, this has been complicated by the strategic positions of Japan and South Korea, as well as their respective alliances with the US. The second factor is particularly noticeable with regard to the issue of anti-Russian economic sanctions and their implementation. “Building of good-neighborly relations and promoting mutually beneficial co-operation”6 with Japan can be called the second important direction of Russia’s policy in Northeast Asia. As in ties with China, good personal relations between Putin and Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe are an important factor in this relationship as well.

For many years, Tokyo’s claims to four Southern Kuril Islands and the absence of a peace treaty after the Second World War were stumbling blocks to substantial long-term co-operation. Japan used to insist on a favorable resolution of the “territorial dispute” as a precondition to wide expansion of economic co-operation. But in 2016, Abe declared a new approach, arguing that the development of economic contacts with Russia could be a stimulus for Moscow to soften its position on the islands. Tokyo’s goal in regional economic co-operation...
At the beginning of the 2010s, Russia tried to boost Security Council in 2016-2017 in response to South Korea, despite the fact that the prospects for current stage it lags behind China and Japan, developing the Russian Far East. Although at the different positions on quite a lot of international areas of bilateral co-operation include very limited a willingness to promote economic co-operation a potentially important economic partner in Moscow and Seoul declared their ambition to elevate resolution of the North Korean nuclear issue. The remaining two of the four Southern Kuril Islands in the form of the deployment of the American THAAD system. Moscow expected that Russian and Chinese recognition of South Korea would be followed by Japanese and American recognition of North Korea, but this did not materialize. Pyongyang has been trying to engage with Moscow as ties with Beijing worsen, this effort has not brought about any tangible practical results.

But as it became clear that economic sanctions cannot completely hinder North Korea’s nuclear and missile programs, Moscow started to push for dialogue more actively. Russian scholars often say that the roots of the current political and military tensions on the Korean Peninsula originate in the unsolved “Korean issue.” After the Cold War ended, Russia expected that Russian and Chinese recognition of South Korea would be followed by Japanese and American recognition of North Korea, but this did not materialize. Pyongyang felt increasingly insecure and developed a nuclear program to acquire self-defense capabilities.

A “road map” initiated recently by Russia and supported by China is based on a de facto nuclear North Korea in the short- and even medium-term and seeks to engage in international efforts to provide it with security guarantees. The final (and probably long-term) goal of these efforts would be to make North Korea abandon its nuclear ambitions. The first stage of the plan, however, is to achieve a simultaneous freeze on North Korean nuclear and missile tests as well as large-scale American and South Korean military drills conducted near the North’s border. In Russia’s opinion, such an initiative might help ease tensions in the region and pave the way to a constructive dialogue between the concerned parties. Yet, the United States has so far not clarified its position on the initiative, despite claiming an interest in dialogue.

Conclusion
Russia’s policy in Northeast Asia is based on long-term goals — maintaining its strategic position in this highly dynamic region of the world and receiving much needed economic support in the face of the Western sanctions regime. Trump’s election has directly and indirectly influenced Russia’s Northeast Asia policy. With the US president’s more aggressive stance toward North Korea, Moscow feels more pressure to step up as an important player in achieving a peaceful resolution of tensions on the Korean Peninsula. At the same time, Russia is seeking opportunities to expand economic ties with Japan and South Korea, which have been promoting co-operation in a more active way recently, even with anti-Russian US sanctions in place.

Liudmila Zakharova is a Senior Researcher at the Centre for Korean Studies of the Institute of Far Eastern Studies, Russian Academy of Sciences, Moscow.


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“Korea Peace Forum” is a non-profit, nongovernmental organization that seeks reconciliation for the two Koreas. It is comprised of former officials from the Ministry of National Unification and diplomats who have planned and executed the engagement policy towards North Korea, scholars who constructed the theoretical foundation for the engagement policy, civil society members who have worked on the ground to lead exchanges between the two Koreas seeking inter-Korean reconciliation and cooperation in all fields.