Can North Korea Keep Playing Off Its Two Large Neighbors?

By Brian Bridges & Chan Che-po

With its January nuclear test, North Korea returned to the headlines, drawing international condemnation. Coming while it has been trying to repair its relations with China and draw closer to Russia, the action calls into question Kim Jong Un’s diplomatic efforts to use Russia as a way to pressure China, write Brian Bridges and Chan Che-po. Ultimately, Pyongyang has to recognize Beijing’s primacy.

2016 LITERALLY started with a bang on the Korean Peninsula as North Korea detonated an underground nuclear device on Jan. 6. While outside experts dispute Pyongyang’s claim that it tested a hydrogen bomb, the action nevertheless raised tensions on the peninsula and led to further censure by the United Nations Security Council.

Significantly for North Korea, both of its two large neighbors China and Russia responded in a critical manner, both supporting tough UN sanctions. At a time when North Korea seemed to be rebuilding relations with its ally, China, and boosting relations with Russia, the test raised questions about the diplomatic strategy of leader Kim Jong Un.

Foreign observers have frequently commented on Kim’s efforts to present a different style of governing — not least in his public persona — from his father Kim Jong Il. As part of this process he seems to be modelling himself on his grandfather, Kim Il Sung, partly in aspects of his physical appearance, but also in his policymaking. His byungjin line, announced in 2013, of focusing equally on economic reconstruction and nuclear weapons development, certainly carries echoes of Kim Il Sung’s much earlier dual line of economic and defense build-up.1

Both Sides Against the Middle

Kim is also following in his grandfather’s footsteps in trying to once again play his two large neighbors off against each other. Over the past couple of years, as he tried to free himself from over-dependence on China diplomatically, strategically and economically, and tensions grew in

No.4: A History of North Korean Nuclear Tests

2006
On October 9, six days after a warning, an underground blast measuring an estimated 0.5 kilotons was recorded. Some analysts believe the explosion was so small because it partially failed.

2009
On May 25 an underground blast estimated at about 2.5 kilotons was recorded. It is believed to have been largely prompted as a show of strength after Kim Jong Il suffered a stroke.

2013
On February 12, a blast estimated at 6-9 kilotons was recorded. North Korea claimed it was from a miniaturized nuclear weapon, demonstrating an advance in sophistication.

2016
On January 6, an underground blast was recorded so far estimated as larger than the 2013 test. North Korea said it had tested a hydrogen bomb, but it has been claimed to be a less powerful fission bomb.
the bilateral relationship, Russia rose in importance on his diplomatic agenda. As North Korea’s relations with China have deteriorated, its contacts with Russia have improved.

Kim’s new policies towards Russia have been designed not only to tempt Moscow into providing necessary economic, energy and military assistance but also to show the Chinese that he is not totally reliant on them. The more Russia can be drawn into supporting North Korea, the more Kim will be able to play the Russian card against China — while, of course, trying to simultaneously use the China card against Russia. But he will find that for all the strains in the Sino-North Korean relationship, Russia will not be able to replace the “blood alliance” with China.

AN AWKWARD ALLY
After the Korean War, North Korea signed friendship treaties with both China and the Soviet Union, but Kim II Sung soon began to espouse his own self-reliant version of socialism, juche, even though in practice he came to depend on these two states for subsidized trade, military aid and political cover. Kim II Sung cleverly exploited the split in the communist bloc between China and the Soviet Union to keep them both courting him and helping him materially.

However, the strategy of playing the two communist powers off against each other took a blow when the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991. The next Kim, Kim Jong II, after 1994 was therefore confronted by a new Russia and a reforming China, both of which were busy developing relations with South Korea. Although China remained “neutral” in the first nuclear crisis of 1993-94, not until the late 1990s did high-level exchanges between China and North Korea resume.

At the same time, North Korea’s relations with Russia began to be reinvigorated after Vladimir Putin became president in 1998. In marked contrast to his predecessor, Boris Yeltsin, who had evinced no interest in North Korea, Putin, who was determined to restore Russia’s standing in the world, saw Northeast Asia, including the Korean Peninsula, as an area where Russian influence should be re-asserted. At the multilateral level this meant Russia was pleased to be invited into the Six-Party Talks, hosted by China after 2003, partly because of its genuine concerns about North Korean nuclear weapons development but also because it symbolically recognized Russia’s role as a power in Northeast Asia. Kim Jong II, who personally telephoned Putin to get Russia involved, must have looked on Russia as an honest broker.2

Bilaterally, Putin was keen to establish a close personal relationship with Kim Jong II, who met him in Pyongyang (Putin was the first Russian/Soviet leader ever to visit North Korea), Moscow and the Russian Far East, the last meeting only four months before Kim Jong II died. Under Putin a revised treaty with North Korea was finalized, which removed the automatic obligation of Russia to assist North Korea militarily but also set out plans for large-scale economic co-operation (which never materialized). Nonetheless, Russia became increasingly wary of North Korean nuclear and missile tests and, albeit reluctantly at times, joined in a succession of UN Security Council resolutions and statements critical of Pyongyang’s actions.

China, too, found itself in a dilemma as the second nuclear crisis developed in 2002 over how to manage its relations with both North Korea and the other interested states, while trying to ensure that the Korean Peninsula remained both denuclearized and stable. The China-initiated Six-Party Talks collapsed in 2009 and despite Chinese efforts they have still not resumed. Incidents such as the 2010 sinking of the South Korean naval corvette Cheonan and North Korea’s shelling of Yeonpyeong Island later the same year added to tensions on the peninsula, which had not dissipated when Kim Jong Il died.

THE NEW LEADER LOOKS NORTH
The dynastic succession, while not wholly unexpected, nonetheless raised important questions for Russian and Chinese policy-makers about North Korea’s stability and future policy direction.

China was the first state to offer condolences on Kim Jong Il’s death, and all the top Chinese leaders visited the North Korean Embassy to pay respects. Although, seemingly, no Chinese leader had a substantial conversation with Kim Jong Un before he took over, China saw no alternative but to support the succession. However, the new leader’s early actions unsettled China. Ignoring Chinese entreaties, he launched long-range missiles and conducted a third nuclear test, thereby raising tensions with the international community. Moreover, China could only watch as Kim Jong

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How has China responded to the warming Russian-North Korean relationship? At the state level, since the Chinese government remains wedded to the idea of re-convening the Six-Party Talks, it makes few official comments… But, at the popular level, analysis of Internet chat rooms suggests that Chinese netizens are less restrained and more critical.


4 http://prophecyintheeast.com/blog/2015/01/eew3-uddermost-us-troops-headed-to.html. Chinese netizens interpreted this plan as an unfriendly gesture towards China.


Un reshuffled and purged military and party officials, though one removal did cause shock: the public purging and execution of his uncle Jang Song Thaek in December 2013. Widely associated with North Korea’s efforts to improve economic co-operation with China, Jang was accused of being a traitor who had been selling off land and natural resources to a “foreign country,” which was obviously China.

Consequently, relations between China and North Korea deteriorated. After the 2013 nuclear test, Chinese President Xi Jinping said, “No one should be allowed to throw a region and even the whole world into chaos for selfish gains.” It was a strong message surely aimed at North Korea. In addition, Xi was willing to reinforce this approach in July 2014 by becoming the first Chinese President ever to visit Seoul before going to Pyongyang; high-level contacts with South Korea proliferated while similar interactions almost ceased between China and North Korea. Despite continuing to pro-
vide necessary food and fuel, from China’s perspective its national interests had never been considered by the new Kim in his policy-making, and by mid-2015 China’s relations with North Korea had reached their lowest point in history.

By 2014, the contrast with North Korea-Russia relations was stark. The Russians had good contacts with North Korea under Kim Jong Il, and on his death Prime Minister Dmitri Medvedev was quick to express his condolences. Although momentum went out of the relationship initially as the Russians knew little about the new leader, subsequently both sides have been making efforts to warm up again. In 2012, the two sides negotiated a deal on effectively writing off 90 percent of North Korea’s outstanding debts to Russia (estimated at around US$11 billion), though it was not ratified until May 2014. Later in 2014, the two states agreed on using the Russian ruble, not the US dollar, in bilateral trade. These steps make trade deals easier to handle, though bilateral trade still remains low compared to China-North Korea trade. North Korea traded approximately US$112 million in 2014 with Russia compared to US$6.3 billion with China. In September 2013, the reconstructed railway line from the Russian border town of Khasan to the Russian-managed cargo terminal in the North Korean port of Rason opened. In October 2014, Russia offered 50,000 tons of grain to the North. The same month, both sides agreed that Russia would help North Korea to modernize its railway system and its mining extraction techniques, while North Korea would pay with its coal and other minerals. Named “Victory,” this is a 20-year, US$25 billion project.

Although invited, Kim Jong Un has not yet visited Russia. Nonetheless, he did send the veteran Kim Yong Nam, the putative head of state, to the Sochi Winter Olympics in February 2014 and the end-of-World War II celebrations in Moscow in May 2015. Kim Jong Un, of course, has not followed in his father’s footsteps by making China his first overseas visit shortly after assuming the leadership post. In fact, he has not left North Korea, but he irritated China by allowing speculation to rise in early 2015 that he might visit Moscow before Beijing.

There also have been improved military-to-military contacts with Russia, and armed forces Chief of Staff Valery Gerasimov announced in February 2015 that there would be joint military drills with North Korea, Cuba, Brazil and Vietnam, excluding China (though these have yet to occur). In November 2015, a high-level Russian military delegation signed an agreement on preventing dangerous military activities, apparently to avoid accidental cross-border entry. However, one key indicator in examining the growing intimacy between North Korea and Russia is whether the latter is willing to sell advanced weapons. Currently, the North Korean air force possesses around 600 military aircraft; yet 70 percent were provided by the ex-Soviet Union in the 1950s and 1960s, and even the most advanced, Mig-29 fighters, were supplied before the Soviet Union collapsed. North Korea wants to replace some of these old aircraft with new ones from Russia. But major obstacles for any such military transactions are Pyongyang’s financial shortages as well as Russia’s caution about upgrading North Korea’s military capabilities. So far, there is no sign of Russian willingness to meet North Korea’s requests.

KOREA IN THE CHINA-RUSSIA DENTENTE
Kim Il Sung was able to play off its two socialist allies so effectively in part because of the Sino-Soviet split, which lasted from the mid-1950s until at least 1989. The situation is different for his grandson. China’s own relations with Russia are no longer so antagonistic. In fact, they have actually strengthened in recent years — the 2015 visits by each president to the other’s capital for World War II commemorations symbolize this well. Trade is growing, energy contracts are being concluded (albeit after prolonged haggling over price details), military sales from Russia to China have grown, and the two states share concerns about the US regional presence and Japan’s heightened defense posture. Yet it may be more a marriage of convenience than a return to the full-fledged alliance of the early 1950s. The Russians are recently being looked down on by the new-rich Chinese — and they are wary of the growing Chinese presence in the Russian Far East. China, in turn, watches Russian “expansionism” carefully, especially in Central Asia, which China increasingly views as part of its sphere of influence.

Despite their shared involvement in the Six-Party Talks, the two states do not necessarily share the same view of the Korean Peninsula. This gives Kim Jong Un something to exploit to his benefit.

OPENING FOR MISCHIEF
China strongly believes that a peaceful, stable and non-nuclear Korean Peninsula is in its best interest. The commitment to achieving this through dialogue, namely by denuclearization of North Korea through the Six-Party Talks mechanism, remains a consistent refrain of Chinese state-level discourse. China has tried under Xi to exert pressure on the North Korean leadership by using its “special relationship” to minimize the rationalization of North Korea’s domestic and foreign policies, thereby preserving Chinese strategic interests and diplomatic face vis-à-vis the international community. Yet, these efforts have largely failed; China has lost face and its regional interests have suffered.

In October 2015, Liu Yunshan, the No. 5 figure in the Chinese Communist Party Politburo Standing Committee, visited Pyongyang to attend the 70th Anniversary of the Korean Workers’ Party (KWP), signifying China’s intention to maintain not just a “normal” relationship, but an “improved” one. But any goodwill created was wiped out by the January nuclear test, which, in a break with past precedent, China was not even informed about in advance.

Russia undoubtedly shares with China a belief that the Korean Peninsula should be nuclear weapon-free and, not least because it is given status through the Six-Party Talks, Russia supports a resumption of multilateral dialogue with the North. However, the major reason for a closer relationship between Russia and North Korea in recent years is due to both states facing economic sanctions from the international community (Russia for its military actions in Ukraine, North Korea for its missile and nuclear tests). Through co-operation they can help each other to lessen the international pressure and boost their own economies. Putin has pushed a “Look East” policy to show the world that Russia is still a key player in East Asia and the Korean Peninsula in particular.

For North Korea, Russia can help to break its own international isolation. Particularly since Russia has veto power in the UN Security Council, North Korea looks to Russia to veto, or at least abstain on, efforts by the United States and other powers to criticize North Korea’s human rights record and nuclear weapon issues within the council. On March 2, of course, that hope was frustrated when Russia joined the unanimous vote to impose the harshest sanctions in 20 years on Pyongyang in the wake of the January nuclear test.

NEW OUTLOOK
The closer relationship with Russia can still be interpreted as part of Kim Jong Un’s new diplomatic outlook. His idea of diplomacy differs from the two previous Kims in that he wants to engage more directly and bilaterally with the United
States, South Korea, Japan and other countries instead of relying on China; or being restrained within a small circle of engagement. Part of this “full dimension diplomacy” is developing a closer Russian relationship. It is also at a very basic level a policy of escaping from Chinese influence.

How has China responded to the warming Russian-North Korean relationship? At the state level, since the Chinese government remains wedded to the idea of re-convening the Six-Party Talks (thereby including Russia), it makes few official comments beyond blandly supporting any dialogue. But, at the popular level, analysis of Internet chat rooms suggests that Chinese netizens are less restrained and more critical not only of Kim Jong Un and North Korea but also of Kim’s efforts to cozy up to Russia. The ability of popular opinion to influence policy-making in China is unclear, but at the very least popular views can complicate Chinese state-level decision-making.

From Russia’s perspective, there has been a “honeymoon” period with North Korea, but as the recent nuclear and missile tests and the sanctions vote have shown, a lifelong marriage is impossible at the moment. Russia is against North Korea’s nuclear testing and would not recognize it as a nuclear-weapons state. But Russia is also against using physical force to achieve denuclearization; instead Moscow insists on dialogue and negotiation as the only approach, thereby aligning it with Beijing. Even though initially miffed at being excluded from US-China negotiations over the UNSC resolution terms, Russia has agreed to further UN sanctions against North Korea. Remaining wary of calls for “comprehensive-scale sanctions,” Russia, like China, could argue on humanitarian grounds that energy and food should still be allowed to be supplied to North Korea, although the new resolution embargoes trade in coal and aviation fuel, among other commodities, which will negatively impact on Russia’s economic projects with North Korea. If not openly, at least behind the scenes, Russia would urge North Korea to go back to the negotiating table of the Six-Party Talks to get rid of its nuclear capability first.

From the North Korean perspective, Russia is the only great power Kim could rely on other than China, so if he is to follow a general policy to “de-Sinicize” then he has no option but to tilt towards Russia. However, Kim’s actions in carrying out a fourth nuclear test, which he may well consider necessary to build up his domestic image in the run-up to the major Korean Worker’s Party Congress in May this year, will undercut his approach to Russia. Russia is politically out of favor with the West over its Ukraine actions, but as Putin told South Korean President Park Geun-hye in late 2015, North Korean nuclear weapons cannot be tolerated — a view obviously shared with the West. Kim may have miscalculated if he believed that Russia could replace China in a new alliance.

North Korea has two land borders on the northern side of its territory: a 17km border with Russia and a 1,420km border with China. While not implying that geography explains everything in international politics, superficially this length imbalance could also symbolically represent the imbalance in influence between those two large states on North Korea. Much as Kim might wish to alter this balance of influence, for the foreseeable future and despite tensions in the Sino-North Korean relationship, China, not Russia, will remain the key counterpoint in North Korean strategies.

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