

# The Sino–Russian Partnership and U.S. Policy Toward North Korea: From Hegemony to Concert in Northeast Asia

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This paper presents two sets of arguments: one theoretical and one analytical. The theoretical arguments concern the relationship between regional ordering and systemic change. The paper questions the usefulness of the unipolar conception of the contemporary system arguing that the interaction of the Great Powers cannot be understood without reference to regional dynamics. Thus, a unipolar system implies considerable potential for U.S. hegemonic intervention at the regional level but in East Asia, we find an equilibrium constructed out of both material and normative forces, defined as a concert, which presents a considerable restraint on all powers, including the U.S. The paper then proceeds to examine these claims through an analysis of the foreign policies of the U.S., Russia, and China over the North Korean nuclear problem that emerged after 2002. It finds that China and Russia have substantive common interests arising from internal and external re-ordering in which they look to strategic partnerships, regional multilateralism, and systemic multipolarization as inter-locking processes. The paper finds that they have collaborated over the Korean crisis to prevent a U.S. unilateral solution but that this should not be construed as a success for an open counterhegemonic strategy as it was only under the constraining conditions of East Asian concert, including the dynamics within the U.S. alliance systems, that this collaboration was successful. Nevertheless, the paper concludes that regional multipolarity and systemic unipolarity are contradictory: a system that exhibits multipolarization at the regional level cannot be characterized as unipolar at the global level.

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Brooks and Wohlforth (2002:27) argue that if the present international order is not unipolar, then nothing ever will be. The U.S. stands so far ahead of any of its possible competitors in all capabilities of power that the international system is essentially defined by its interests. Moreover, there is very little possibility for balancing of U.S. power: a close look at the strategic relationships between the Great Powers, including the Sino–Russian relationship, “reveal their rhetorical as opposed to substantive character.” Balancing conversely entails the willingness to incur real costs, meaning not only the redirection of domestic resources but the costs resulting from hegemonic displeasure. As few powers would at present rationally

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accept these costs, U.S. power is largely unconstrained. Rather, the main consequence of unipolarity has been “the unique freedom it offers American policy makers. . . U.S. foreign policy operates in the realm of choice rather than necessity” (Brooks and Wohlforth, 2002:31).

The thesis that the structural distribution of power in the present international system is best characterized as unipolar has consequences for all powers but none more so than China and Russia. Even in the era of bipolarity, shifts in relations between the U.S., China, and the Soviet Union defined key stages in system evolution. These shifts enshrined what might be called the principles of triangularity, such as alliance (China and the Soviet Union, 1950–1960), realignment (China and the U.S., 1972–1978), and re-centering (China after 1982), where the costs of security were shared between two powers in the triangle in order to increase the costs for the third. In the present system, however, if the unipolarists are correct, all such calculations are irrelevant. The U.S. stands so pre-eminent that the possibilities for alliance, alignment, or centering are minimal. Russia and China cannot align their own relationship in such a way as to impose costs on the U.S. Conversely, the U.S. controls so many of the public goods in the international system—not just collective security but financial, diplomatic, knowledge, and some vital material resources—that no state can risk exclusion from these. Unipolarity denotes a gap between the capacity of the U.S. to impose costs on others, and their capacity to impose costs on it, to the point where balancing is irrational: unipolarity has abolished balance.

Moreover, in this gap resides the potential for U.S. hegemony. Unlike polarity, which describes distributions of power, hegemony denotes a particular mode of exercising power. In Bull’s definition, hegemony stands mid-way between dominance and primacy, which entail the use and absence of habitual force and disregard and regard for sovereignty, respectively (Bull, 2002:207–212). Hegemony implies conditionality, that is, force if necessary, but only after other instruments have failed, and respect for sovereignty unless this is over-ridden by some system-governing principle, most obviously the secure functioning of the hegemonic order itself. Bull regarded dominance, primacy, and hegemony as options for Great Powers at the regional level. But in conditions of global unipolarity, world regions themselves become subject to hegemonic management. Primacy is inadequate; dominance is uneconomic; and in the absence of balance, conditionality of force and sovereignty apply.

The unipolarist position is far from unchallengeable (see, for example, Layne, 1993; Kupchan, 1998). In particular, it depends on two understandings—the nature and organization of power in the international system—that are open to question. IR theory says that poles are constructed out of power, and balance and imbalance flow from relative distributions. But the unipolarist thesis depends on a narrow, materialist definition of power, reflecting the preponderance of the United States itself in force, wealth, and technology. Unipolarity is also contentious with regard to the organization of power, notably its disregard for the emergence of world regions. These have driven transformation in both absolute and relative distributions of power, with East Asia being the obvious example. If a theory of power that emphasized only force, wealth, and technology was adequate, East Asia should be the site of radical internal and external re-structuring as states attempt to convert new-found material assets into news forms of polarity. China is inevitably the focus of such attention as it has massive latent power and is undergoing rapid material transformation. But theorists do not find strong evidence of polar re-structuring around China, either internally as powers attempt to balance or bandwagon or externally in the form of a China-centered coalition against U.S. hegemony (Johnston, 2003:49; Kang, 2003a:58). The absence of convincing evidence has led either to a plethora of conflicting characterizations of East Asian polarity—unipolar, bipolar, multipolar (Betts, 1993/1994; Friedberg, 1993/1994; Ross, 1999; Berger, 2000)—or the abandonment of the concept of polarity altogether, so

that East Asia is seen as having balance without polarity, or at least balance constructed solely out of force–wealth–technology (Buzan, 2003; Kang et al., 2003c).

In the face of this uncertainty, this paper proposes an alternative conception of regional order for East Asia, that of concert. This is defined as a regularized process of consultation and arbitration between Great Powers on issues of mutual concern and interest. Concert does not imply the absence of antagonisms or of alliance relations. It does mean that a power or group of powers will be unable to impose decisions upon the concert, with clear implications for the nature of their relations: those bent on conflict will find their antagonism suppressed; those engaged in alliance will find their cohesion diluted. Like many of the other terms used here—balance, primacy, hegemony—concert has its origins in the tradition of *realpolitik*, but it can be argued that it is theoretically rather agnostic. Realists will argue that concert must be founded on a balance of power; liberals would see it as a tentative move toward rule-based institutionalism; and constructivists would argue that it results from a re-definition of identities and interests as agents and structures reconstitute each other. Thus, as a leading scholar of the nineteenth-century Concert of Europe notes:

Paradoxically, this international order, which was created more explicitly in the name of balance of power than any other before or since, relied the least on power to maintain itself. This unique state of affairs occurred partly because the equilibrium was designed so well that it could only be overthrown by an effort of a magnitude too difficult to mount. But the most important reason was that the Continental countries were knit together by a sense of shared values. There was not only a physical equilibrium, but a moral one. (Kissinger, 1994:79)

This portrait is instructive because it suggests that the binding nature of concert arises from the interaction of material and normative forces, including norms of interest and identity. This allows us to propose that the stability of East Asia in the face of material transformation arises from the compensating adjustment of normative forces. Essentially, material and normative dispositions lock in the options of the Great Powers, stabilizing a potentially imbalanced order.

In proposing this understanding of regional order, the paper will also question the assertions of systemic unipolarity. It can be argued that the unipolarists do not posit a regional level of analysis—holding to the realist canons of unit and system only—but the paper argues that this is one of the fundamental flaws of the position. The arguments about a U.S.-centered unipolar system and regional constructions of power are inseparable. Global unipolarity, and with it the potential for hegemonic intervention and management, are tests that can only be proven or refuted in regional theaters. The central argument of the paper is that regional orders and systemic polarity are mutually constitutive, and both levels are currently transitional with the ambiguity of the strategic environment, a reflection of regional structures in flux.

This paper takes the Sino–Russian strategic partnership announced in 1996 as the most important test case of this relationship between regional ordering and strategic polarity. This partnership has perplexed Western analysts, who, in Gilbert Rozman’s words, cannot say what it is; why it has developed; what it signifies; and how firm it is likely to be (Rozman, 1998:396). In particular, if it is not directed against any third parties—an exercise in balancing—as Russia and China claim, why is it necessary (Rozman, 1998:398)? The paper first tries to make some contribution toward understanding the Sino–Russian partnership, exploring the key imperatives that underpin the relationship, and Russian and Chinese interpretations of systemic change, focusing on their concerns for polarity and hegemony. It then moves from this general framework to explore the relationship between Great Power relations and regional order in East Asia using the second Korean nuclear

crisis as its test case. What does the Russian and Chinese response to U.S. policy over the crisis tell us about the nature of the triangular relationship? Can Russian and Chinese behavior be interpreted as a form of balancing? What does the North Korean crisis have to tell us about the changing nature of the regional order in Northeast Asia, and about the relationship between regional order and global polarity?

### **The Sino–Russian Partnership**

For reasons of space, this section will explore only the three key imperatives that presently underpin the SRP, defined as self-strengthening; geopolitical stability; and learning the lessons of history.

The process of transition has proven to be enormously complex and unpredictable, as much for China and its apparently unstoppable rise as for Russia and its brutal experiment with reverse development. This is because transition encapsulates three different processes of change: change in the organization of society, change in the structure and functioning of the State, and consequently a change in the nature of State–society relations. Both countries have long traditions of state engineering of society but transition is different because the State must change itself at the same time that it changes society, and this is particularly hazardous. Most of the challenges that the Russian and Chinese States now face are internal, such as stabilizing and mastering the market, neutralizing the social cleavages that arise from rapid change, strengthening the means and methods of governance, and controlling the interest groups that now cluster around the State. As to the external, it is subordinate and dependent upon the resolution of these issues. In essence, both States view themselves as being in a 10–20-year window where social and economic self-strengthening take precedence over strategic politics, or more accurately, where strategic politics are to be re-founded on this self-strengthening (Interview, 2003; see Author’s note). In terms of their partnership, each State is aware of the risks that the other is undergoing and recognizes that internal instability within either country could badly effect the security of the other. Each State will offer the other what it can to assist the self-strengthening process (Afanasiev and Barskii, 2003:19). Thus, President Jiang Zemin stated in July 2001:

China will, as always, support Russia in its efforts to invigorate its national economy and safeguard its rights and interests. China will never do anything detrimental to the interests of Russia. We are convinced that China will receive firm support from Russia for its modernization drive and its great cause of reunifying the motherland. (BBCMO, 2001b)

This also means combating the negative consequences of transition—the growth of transnational crime, illegal migration, separatism, and forms of political extremism. It also means sharing strategic resources—military and technological cooperation and negotiating Chinese access to Russia’s energy reserves.

The external corollary to the first imperative is defending the geopolitical stability of Eurasia. In the rush to acclaim liberalism triumphant, the geopolitical consequences of the collapse of Soviet power were grossly underestimated. In Europe, NATO and U.S. influence expanded eastward in a sustained rolling back of the Russian sphere. From the Caucasus to the Tian Shan, a patchwork of contending identities and alignments emerged, which served largely to emphasize the weakness of geopolitical controls. Northeast Asia in contrast was marked by the absence of geopolitical change in either boundaries or alignments. The regional system remained locked in a quadrilateral balance between China, Japan, Russia, and the U.S. that patently predated the formal demise of bipolarity (Ren, 2000). In Russia, the major effect of these changes was to force not just geopolitics, but a

particular conception of geopolitics, back to the mainstream of foreign policy thinking. The term used to describe Russia's condition "*szhatie*" is ambiguous: it can mean contraction, implying a loss of strength, but also compression, implying pressure from outside (Komleva, 2003). Ten years ago, those who were advocating that Russia must resist compression by asserting its influence beyond the boundaries of the Federation or the CIS were considered ultranationalist or neoimperialist (Kerr, 1995). Now, the expression of Russian geopolitical interests within the territory of the former Soviet Union and beyond is taken as normal politics. Thus, Putin stated in 2001 on Korea:

Historically and geopolitically the Korean peninsula has always come within the sphere of Russian national interests (cited in Lukin, 2002:64)

In China, geopolitical awareness relates strongly to the boundaries of the modern Chinese State. China's perimeter, which sweeps from the Northeast in a great arc through Nei Meng, Xinjiang, Tibet to Guangxi, is a cordon sanitaire that new China has assiduously defended against real or imagined pressures (Zhao, 2000:17). The clearest example of all must be China's intervention to resist America and aid Korea (*kangmei yuanchao*) in October–November 1950: China delayed full intervention until U.S./UN determination to advance to the Yalu became evident, after which it intervened with full force. Despite its high costs, this is still regarded as a victory for China because its war aims—the re-establishment of the 38th parallel as a secure boundary and the defense of an ally—were met.

The primary geopolitical gain to Russia and China of their partnership has been bilateral. Whatever geopolitical challenges each country may face, it will not come from the other as long as the partnership endures, exemplified by the largely completed demarcation of their border (Interview, 2003). But in a new departure, they have extended the principle of geopolitical stability to multilateral relations. The Shanghai Co-operation Organization seeks to embed Central Asian relations in a security pact that guarantees boundaries, stabilizes alignments, and deals with common threats, most obviously Islamic insurgency. Like the SRP itself, the founding document of the SCO declares that it is not aimed at any third parties—countries or regions—although this has not prevented the U.S. from viewing it with at least suspicion. This may in part be because of the fact that the members clearly view the organization as having extra-regional importance: "significantly enriching the practice of contemporary diplomacy and regional co-operation, demonstrating a wide and positive influence on international society" (SCO, 2001). Russia, and the Soviet Union before it, has been a long-standing supporter of multilateral security in East Asia, but China is a recent convert. In the SCO, they have found a multilateral structure that might be replicated in Northeast Asia if it did not run so directly against the U.S. system of bilateral alliances.

The final imperative in the SRP is to learn the lessons of history. The logic of this is that the two powers have tried virtually every permutation of bilateral relationship in the modern era but found these unworkable. In particular, neither alliance nor containment proved sustainable. In this view, the principal source of instability has been a real or perceived inequality between the two powers, with stable relations emerging in periods when the two countries were prepared to treat each other as sovereign equals. According to Voskressenski, "the main rationale of the partnership is to construct a new type of relationship aimed at promoting a new and just world community of equals rather than of leaders and followers." In this new order, relations between the U.S., Russia, and China need not be "purely competitive and adversarial" (Voskressenski, 2001:8). Thus, balancing behavior has never been a declared end of the Sino–Russian partnership. On the contrary, Russia and China have advanced their partnership as a vehicle for, and manifestation of, a non-balancing multipolarity (Goldstein, 2001:846). In this construction, poles may be conceived as regions, but Russia and China clearly believe that some powers have

greater responsibility than others for system management. This is what Chinese scholars call “Great Power responsibility” (*daguo zeren*). The Sino–Russian partnership implies recognition of this status in each other.

None of the foregoing is intended to imply the absence of problems in the partnership. Russia and China have never had a trouble-free relationship and do not do so now. The main roots of the present problems lie in the very uncertainty of the regional and strategic environments. As China rises in influence and becomes confident in terms of its identity, most of the challenges fall on Russia, which has suffered a crisis of both influence and identity. The latest Chinese vision of its regional-strategic role—the China Rising thesis—poses no apparent threat to Russia. But it does presume that the center of gravity in Asian regional, and eventually in strategic, affairs is tilting toward China. Yet, the commitment to Russia’s Great-Power status (*velikoderzhavnost’*) remains undiminished, located in two foundational characteristics:

the stabilizing capability within Eurasia, first of all on the territory of the former USSR and therefore globally; and the geopolitical function of bridging the uniting and prosperous Europe and the poor and divided Asia. (Shakleyina and Bogaturov, 2004:45)

Of course, there are possible contentions between Russia and China even in these regards. If Russia cannot or will not perform its historical function of a Eurasian stabilizer, then China may be pulled into the vacuum. The primary candidate is Central Asia. Russia has fundamental interests in re-constituting and re-centering the CIS (or as much of it as can be won over to this project). The SCO process must be at least compatible with this; if it is not, it will be abandoned. Russia presently views the two processes as complementary, not least because none of the Central Asian elites regards China as a viable alternative partner to Russia. Russia as the Euro-Asian bridge could similarly become contentious if Europe–China relations flourish, forcing Russia into the position of each region’s secondary relationship. The solution to both these dilemmas is the same. Russia’s main problem is not yet China’s strength but rather Russian weakness.

In these circumstances, it is hardly surprising that there are differences of view points in Russia on the value and prospect of the SRP. Shakleyina and Bogaturov identify three positions on strategic orientation within the Russian realist school that now dominates foreign policy thinking (Shakleyina and Bogaturov, 2004:42). These emphasize the former Soviet sphere; a Eurasian alliance with Russia–China at its center; and alliances with the plural West, American and European. These orientations are termed realist in that none of them is ostensibly ideological or ideational, but based on differing interpretations of Russian interests. In fact, the orientations are only problematic if they are thought of as alternatives, as they are all to some extent “real” and reflect the diversity of Russian interests and the likely shape of the world order in future years. The response must be to strengthen Russian relations in all directions, building from the regional to the strategic. If one wanted to define Putinism in foreign policy terms, the core conception might be as follows:

The main aim of our policies is not to demonstrate some ambitions of an imperial character, but to achieve favorable external conditions for the development of Russia. There is nothing extraordinary here. We will form a multivector foreign policy, we will work with the United States, with the European Union, and with other countries of Europe. We will work with our Asian partners, with China, with India, and countries of the Asia-Pacific region. (Putin, March 2004; cited in Tor-kunov, 2004:49)

One of the main threats to a stable relationship between Russia and China would be the emergence of a radical nationalism in either country but it is noteworthy that

both Light and Zhao use the same term “pragmatic nationalism” to describe the dominant policy orientation in both countries (Zhao, 2000; Light, 2003). In terms of popular views of the relationship, a considerable amount of space has been devoted to Russian fears of Chinese expansion, if only demographic, but some Russians are still prepared to recognize comparable, and in some senses shared, traditions between the two countries (Afanasiev and Barskii, 2003:19–20). In a survey of Russian citizens’ attitude to foreign countries, China was ranked fourth, behind Bulgaria, India, and Poland, as countries that were friendly, and spiritually close, to Russia (Petrenko, 2003). In a survey of Chinese opinion, respondents were asked to name the countries that had the best political and economic models for China and that posed the greatest threat to China’s development. The U.S. ranked highest in all three: 21% for political model; 40% for economic model; and 76% for threat. The figures for Russia were 12%, 6%, and 3% (Tang, 2001:902).

One of the abiding problems of the relationship, however, is the low level of economic relations between the two countries. This is only partly a function of transitional economics, and at least as much a reflection of the position that the two countries occupy in the hierarchy of the global economy. Russia’s per capita purchasing power is 30% of the OECD average and China’s is 17%, ranking them 60 and 93 in the world (UNDP, 2003). It will be several decades before the two countries develop the effective demand and market actors, such as TNCs, that will allow their bilateral relations to approach the level of their interaction with the OECD. Moreover, as Goldstein notes, a Sino–Russian alliance could never compensate the two parties for the things they would lose by isolating themselves from the U.S.-dominated international economic system (2001:848). Yet, this is an evident incentive to the deepening of economic relations in strategic resources. Cooperation in science and technology remains important but China’s interest in Russian energy has redoubled with the U.S. Gulf intervention. From the Chinese perspective, this has given the U.S. power over a crucial part of the energy supply on which East Asia and China increasingly rely. China cannot afford to become more dependent on Gulf energy if this means becoming dependent on U.S. foreign policy (Interview, 2003). Striking a strategic bargain with Moscow to develop Siberian energy has suddenly become much more urgent. The fact that China faces an immediate setback in its strategy, having lost the struggle with Japan for control of the first oil pipeline from Siberia to Asia, is unlikely to alter the long-term prospects for energy cooperation.

When we look at the imperatives of the relationship outlined above, we see that a significant part of the relationship is located in shared internal and peripheral interests. This gives the relationship a bedrock on which to cope with issues on which interests and perceptions are further apart. The major constraints upon the relationship conversely derive from the regional penetration of the U.S. Thus, in dealing with the core foreign policy concerns of the two governments in the last 10 years—Russia and NATO expansion, China and the U.S.–Taiwan relationship—the partnership provides an insurance policy but little in the way of effective leverage. It was against the context of the increasing “Eurasianization” of U.S. foreign policy (Bogaturov, 2003:34) that Russian and Chinese analysts debated the relationship between systemic polarity and America’s attempts at hegemonic management at the regional level.

### **Polarity and Hegemony**

Polarity and hegemony point to different features of the international system. The former refers to a structural distribution of power, whereas the latter denotes a mode of exercising power. There was regional hegemony under bipolarity; indeed, it was one of its defining characteristics (Bazhanov, 2003:47). It is the concentration

in the distribution around the U.S. that is unique in the modern world and opens the possibility of global hegemony.

The unipolar world dictates the corresponding imperial foreign policy strategy of the United States, the aim of which is to secure for as long a period as possible the present status quo, assuming the domination of America in all regions of the world and minimisation of the possibility of the appearance of competitors, in Europe as much as in Asia (Pavlov, 2003:3)

But as this suggests, U.S. power is composite not monolithic: it is expressed globally but must be exercised regionally. It is within this contradistinction that Russian and Chinese scholars debate the nature of unipolarity and multipolarity and the capacity of the U.S. to exercise hegemony.

In the middle of the 1990s Chinese scholars began to use the concept of *yichao duoqiang* (one superpower, several Great Powers) to describe the post-Cold War power structure (Jin, 2001:311). This was used to suggest a world system that was neither uni- nor multi-polar but something in between. In this contention, a good deal depended on the understanding of how polarity was constructed:

Is the world structure since the end of the Cold War ultimately shifting toward a comparatively balanced power structure of big country relations or the manifestation of a U.S. and Western dominated unipolarity? The many divergent views in the academic world at present on this question rest crucially with the differing perception as to the meaning of “pole.” Many analysts recognise that following the disintegration of the former Soviet Union East-West blocs and because of the relative decline in U.S. power (especially due to the severity of its internal social and racial problems) the bipolar structure has been replaced by a multipolar situation, under which Western Europe and Japan continue to sustain their own independent position, and China has clearly and speedily risen, along with a slowly recovering former Soviet Union, forming new power constraints and “poles,” so that against this power in the present world the “superpole” big country of the U.S. can comparatively only count as a “soft pole.” In the other view that has arisen, the concepts of “pole” and “big power” are not the same, and the term “pole” must realistically be in the total sense of world hegemon or leader, whose comprehensive strength must at certain times far exceed the second place great powers. . . In the eyes of the specialists who hold these different views, the current position at the most can be called “one superpower, several great power structure” or “one superpower four great power plural structure.” (Wang, 1998:14)

Thus while Chinese analysts recognized U.S. power superiority, this did not lead them to conclude that the international system is unipolar (Blum, 2003:249). Rather, China’s main problem has been the extreme volatility of its relationship with the U.S. Song notes three distinct shifts in the period 1997 and 2002 alone: “constructive strategic partnership,” “strategic competitor,” and “constructive and co-operative partnership” (Song, 2002:2). As of 9/11, there have been three stages in the evolution of China’s world view and interpretation of relations with the U.S. From September 2001 to the end of 2002, was a period of uncertainty in which debate focused on whether the U.S. was still in the “strategic competitor” phase or whether the shift to the War on Terror and against Rogue States was now the dominant characteristic. After the 16th CCP Congress at the end of 2002, this was decisively answered in terms of the latter. The present stage begins with the Iraq war. China’s world view has been forced to change as a result of U.S. hegemonic ambition, evident in the pre-emption doctrine, but bilateral relations have also improved because of changed U.S. priorities. China’s world view must be more

objective and hard-headed: in time, there may be a return to multilateralism but pre-emption will be a long-term problem (Interview, 2003).

In this environment, there was little prospect for using the UN or of organizing a grand coalition to oppose U.S. hegemony. Certainly, Chinese analysts do not advocate that China lead such a coalition (Song, 2002:7). In these circumstances, China looks to the interaction between unipolarity and multipolarity as a historical process in which the more the U.S. pursues hegemonic intervention, the more it provokes multipolar responses on the part of the *duoqiang*. China bases its response on what these other powers are doing. It is very interested in the transatlantic split and the emergence of a European strategic identity (Feng, 2003), but pays most attention to the attitude of Russia. The warming of Russian relations with the U.S. as of 9/11 has unsettled Chinese analysts. A majority still consider Russia's cooperation to be superficial and tactical. Strategically, Russia is not reconciled to its loss of status and will oppose the U.S. geopolitical encroachment. Other views stress the common attitudes of the U.S. and Russia to terrorism: if anything, the threat to Russian society from terrorism is greater than that to the U.S. (Interview, 2003). Others point to a changed, but ambiguous relationship:

In the present short period, relations between Russia and America in international affairs have been neither that of opponents but also very hard to become allies, as the Cold War practice of pacts acting as blocs has faded into a historical stage, being replaced by the possibility of a mutually beneficial co-operative relationship. It is undoubted that in international relations, owing to economic, military and other power gaps, America still has the decisive role. At present Russia is weak, but in future, Russia cannot allow America to occupy for a long time its domain. (Tian, 2003)

Quite how lasting the U.S.–Russian rapprochement will prove is open to question. In the months before 9/11, CIA Director Tenet had told Congress that Putin was “making attempts to impede U.S. influence in other former Soviet republics and to restore Russia as the main power in that region” and that Russia viewed its relations with China, India, and Iran as “one means of globally restricting U.S. influence” (BBCMO, 2001a). Certainly, Russian analysts had few illusions about U.S. motivations for improving Russian relations.

The paradoxically benevolent attitude of the American “hawks” currently to Russia . . . is of course not related to any feeling toward the former competitor in the bipolar order. Simply Washington has become interested in the support (or at least the benevolent neutrality) of Moscow if it decides to undertake any further “liberation path” against the next member of the “axis of evil.” (Smirnov, 2003:66)

Lieven argues that the U.S. needs Russia because of its continued influence in Central and West Asia, and Russian refusal to aid the U.S. in these regions would have run directly counter to its own interests; but “mutual avoidance of lunacy is a good deal less than a true ‘partnership’” (Lieven, 2002:253). Whatever the U.S. may have extracted from Russia in terms of support, it did not believe greatly in reciprocation. In the 6 months after 9/11, the U.S. announced that it would abrogate the ABM Treaty; that it would store, not dismantle, the warheads from its decommissioned strategic forces; and that it would not be seeking negotiations with Russia on future arms limitations. Leading analyst Alexei Arbatov—noting that NMD was primarily aimed at the containment of China—said that the U.S. no longer needed to negotiate as Russia had given away unilaterally whatever strategic advantages it possessed (BBCMO, 2001d).

Yet, like their Chinese counterparts, many Russian commentators are reluctant to declare unipolarity an accomplished fact. There exist significant obstacles to U.S. hegemony, not only in the policy of Great Powers but of the rogue states who see in weapons of mass destruction the “panacea” to U.S. dominance (Bazhanov, 2003:47). In trying to deal with the complexity of global hegemony, Washington cannot act unilaterally but has to recruit as many willing supporters as possible. This is why the U.S. was much less condemnatory of the Russian opposition to the Iraq intervention than that of France or Germany. Russia was seen as offering clear-cut support in some spheres while refusing it in others. The U.S. has essentially created a bargaining process in which it must co-opt other powers to its agenda:

Despite the growing drive of Washington toward one-sided hegemony and the subordination of all remaining members of world society to the role of “junior partner,” the realities of the contemporary world are pushing, and will continue to push, the United States to more realistic and rational policies of co-operation. (Bazhanov, 2003:50–51)

Throughout the period since 9/11, as their relations with the U.S. changed, both China and Russia held to the course established for their bilateral relationship. Moscow assured its Asian partners, and China in particular, that the improvement in the relationship with Washington was not at their expense (BBCMO, 2001e). Moreover, China also significantly adjusted its relations with the U.S. In Washington in May 2002, President Hu Jintao made commitments to maintain cooperation with the U.S. on the war on terror on a bi-directional and mutually beneficial basis (BBCMO, 2002b), although China has been careful never to endorse wars on states as opposed to non-state groups.

What was notable was that in the statements that emerged from the Sino–Russian summits after 9/11, the concept that their partnership was specifically opposed to hegemony slipped from view. The vision of multipolarity remained and with it came new commitments to the democratization of international relations; the treatment of all powers as sovereign and equal; repeated calls for international disputes to be settled via the UN; and appeals to the significance of the partnership in international relations. The Declaration from the May 2003 Moscow summit held:

The sides note the wide congruence of interests of Russia and China in international and regional affairs. The partnership and strategic co-operation relations of the two countries has principal significance as a major factor in international relations for the future of world politics, maintenance of peace, and the support of global security and stability... The co-ordination of the foreign policy efforts of the two countries on a wide range of questions of international life, conducted on a regular basis through different channels and at different levels, permits effective joint action in the resolution of contemporary global and regional problems. (MIDRE, 2003)

The declaration goes on to make commitments to the peaceful resolution of the crisis on the Korean peninsula, and argues that “the resolution of the problem by pressure or the use of force are unacceptable scenarios.” The importance of the Korean peninsula as a test case of the partnership should be evident. It has the potential to effect the internal stability of both countries, it is at a point of shared geopolitical sensitivity, and it still carries historical resonance. Equally, multipolarity has to start somewhere. Even if both countries now conceive of multipolarity as a long-term historical process, this must somehow be reflected in, and instrumentalized through, the strategic partnerships around which they intend to organize and manage the international system. Intrinsic within the concept of multipolarity, moreover, is some return to a system in balance and, with it, limits on the potential

for hegemonic behavior. Can their response to U.S. policy over the Korean nuclear crisis be interpreted as part of a counter-hegemonic strategy?

### **Russia, China, and U.S. Policy Toward North Korea**

#### *U.S. Foreign Policy Toward North Korea*

North Korea's security environment has deteriorated in both the long and short term. China's decision to tilt toward Washington in the 1970s weakened the DPRK's capacity to play Moscow and Beijing off against one another, and led to an imbalanced dependence on the Soviet Union, especially in weaponry and energy. With the Soviet collapse in 1991 and the Yeltsin administration's abandonment of the relationship with North Korea, China remained the sole source of external support. Yet, a key component of China's reaction to the collapse of European communism was a diplomatic offensive across East Asian Cold War boundaries, including the normalization of relations with South Korea in 1992. Pyongyang regarded this as a telling act of betrayal on Beijing's part (Zhang and Brown, 2001:537) and, while economic interaction increased, there were no high-level exchanges between the two capitals for 7 years (Chen, 2003:9). North Korea's insecurity was further heightened by the growing contrast between its own economic and social malaise and the rapid development across Northeast Asia (Kim, 2001:34). This was most apparent in the contrast between the two Korean states. Kang (2003b:303) notes that in virtually all indicators of power capability, the South surged ahead. In these circumstances, the DPRK had dual incentives to engage externally. It needed to end its diplomatic isolation and gain external guarantees of its own security, and it was forced to pursue an "aid-based' survival strategy" (Pollack, 2003:21). The question of how it might achieve these ends proved more complex. As the geopolitical situation changed in the 1990s, the DPRK sought to engage the West, including the U.S. (Kang, 2003b:316), but it found that provocation was at least as likely to render results. It has developed a negotiating strategy in which it bargains its weapons systems, and in particular its nuclear status, against security assurances and aid. For some, this approach seems less than rational but for North Korea, it both makes sense and works. Its needs for security and sovereignty—which are as absolute as any in the international system—must be met either by engagement or by threats, and what cannot be supplied from one route must be supplied by the other. This strategy poses major problems for those who interact with North Korea, in that the route to engagement is extremely hard to find and sustain. They have to resist the temptation of responding to North Korean threats by increased deterrence and they have to overlook the dubious politics of rewarding threats by engagement. Yet, the first Korean nuclear crisis of 1992–1994 was essentially solved by adopting this approach.

North Korea had signed the Non-Proliferation Treaty in 1985 at the insistence of the Soviet Union who supplied the technology for its plutonium reactors. But it was 1989 before compliance with IAEA inspection was met and Western intelligence sources have continued to point to this blind spot when plutonium production may have occurred as a factor in North Korea's nuclear status. In 1992, following an IAEA inspection crisis, North Korea threatened to leave the NPT and the Clinton administration appeared to be opting for military strikes before turning to negotiation. The Agreed Framework (AF) of 1994 reached by the U.S. and the DPRK would run for 10 years, during which time, the U.S. would prepare the installation of two Light Water Reactors and supply fuel oil as an interim measure, in exchange for the freezing of North Korea's reactor program at Yongbyon. The U.S. was also obligated not to use or threaten to use nuclear weapons against North Korea (Pollack, 2003:18). The AF was under pressure as early as 1997, with the U.S. increasingly reluctant to meet its commitment to build the LWRs and the twin track of

engaging or deterring North Korea swung back toward the latter. A turning point was reached in 1998. North Korea tested a ballistic missile over northern Japan and the U.S. and Japan quickly moved to advance the Theatre Missile Defence program for Northeast Asia (Zhang and Brown, 2001:540). The missile testing was also the catalyst for the first meaningful security cooperation between Japan and South Korea (Kaseda, 2003:122–123), and in 1999 the U.S. initiated a regularized consultation process among the allies on policy toward North Korea under the Trilateral Coordination and Oversight Group.

But the engagement side also revived in 1998 with the election of Kim Dae-jung as ROK President and a major improvement in the possibility for inter-Korean rapprochement. Kim Dae-jung's engagement ("sunshine") policy culminated in the ground-breaking summit between the two Heads of State in 2000. The two sides asserted that unification was an issue that should be resolved by Seoul and Pyongyang independently; North Korea accepted the principle of stationing U.S. forces in the South after unification; and they agreed on a number of forms of inter-Korean co-operation (Lim and Ro, 2002:3). Along with improvements in relations with Beijing and Moscow after 1999, North Korea appeared to have taken major steps toward ending its isolation, with significant consequences for the region.

[T]he speed and breadth of change on and around the peninsula have been so great as to challenge the framework within which we have viewed inter-Korean relations and to call into question some basic assumptions on which we predicated our expectations concerning the interactions between the major powers and the two Koreas. (Kim, 2001:32)

It was in this context that the Bush administration came to power. Its East Asia policy emphasized a renewed commitment to its regional allies, but it was clearly closer to Japan than to the government of Kim Dae-jung (Pollack, 2003:25). This was reinforced after Kim's March 2001 visit to Washington when Bush appeared to scorn Kim's sunshine policy (Cha, 2002:79). Nevertheless, although prominent conservative critics of the AF gained positions in the administration, there was no immediate change in policy to North Korea. The comprehensive policy review on North Korea undertaken for the administration in June 2001 assumed "improved implementation" of the AF, not its abandonment (Pollack, 2003:27), including concrete concessions on inspection regimes and arms controls and reductions (Gill, 2002:46). The transition in U.S. policy toward North Korea took place between September 2001 and October 2002. The State of the Union speech of January 2002 signaled the major shift in the War on Terror, from agents of terrorism to states that might engage in proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, in which North Korea was included. But the administration seemed uncertain on how to prosecute its case against North Korea. In March 2002, Director of the CIA, George Tenet, told the Senate Armed Services Committee:

North Korea continues to export complete ballistic missiles and production capabilities along with related raw materials, components, and expertise. . . North Korea continues to comply with the terms of the Agreed Framework that are directly related to the freeze on its reactor program, but Pyongyang has warned that it is prepared to walk away from the agreement if it concluded that the United States was not living up to its end of the deal. (Tenet, 2002)

This meant that when the Bush administration announced in the same month that it would not certify the DPRK's compliance with the AF, it could do so only on the grounds that Pyongyang had been in breach of its commitments as a non-nuclear state before the implementation of the Framework, not that the plutonium program had not been frozen but that it might have hidden nuclear materials before

1989 and that it was not allowing nuclear inspection in “a timely manner” (Gill, 2002:46). Even this was not hard enough evidence upon which to abandon the Framework completely: the fact that North Korea might possess some quantity of plutonium had been routinely reported by the CIA to Congress throughout the 1990s (Cumings, 2003). Rather, the U.S. was to charge Pyongyang in October 2002 with pursuing a nuclear capability by a new route: acquiring technology to enrich uranium to weapons grade. As with the plutonium claim, this was not new intelligence: the Clinton administration had begun to receive these reports as early as 1999 (Pollack, 2003:24).

A central question then becomes: why did the crisis erupt in October 2002? The primary response should focus on Washington’s decision to go to war in Iraq and the consequences of this for its regional management systems. Having elected for military intervention in Afghanistan and Iraq, it was important that other regions remained stable and did not draw on resources. Provoking a showdown with Pyongyang may not seem a stabilizing tactic but Washington has always resisted the term “crisis” to describe the destruction of the AF, indicating that its intention was to control peninsular affairs and not radicalize them. The event that it sought most to control was a significant weakening of the DPRK containment system that was a key component of the Northeast Asian security order. This meant that Washington looked first to its alliance relations.

In the case of South Korea, democratization and the confidence that came with achieving developed nation status had already weakened the unthinking dependence on the U.S. alliance. This process was further accelerated by inter-Korean rapprochement:

The improving relations between the two Koreas since the late 1990s has irreversibly changed the perception of America among ordinary South Korean citizens. The decisive impetus for change was the engagement policy (“sunshine policy”) toward North Korea initiated by President Kim Dae-jung in 1998. Once the engagement policy set out to change the image of North Korea from that of “devil” into the other half of the single-yet-divided Korean nation that shared a common goal of reunification, the sentimental identification with America, which had been bred from the belief that communist North Korea was their common enemy, began to loosen. (Gweon, 2004:170–171)

Nor was this to change under Kim’s successor, Roh Moo-hyun. The nature of the U.S.–ROK relationship was a central issue in the election of December 2002, with the reformist, pro-engagement Roh winning out over his conservative, pro-U.S. rival Lee Hoi-chang, who Roh described in campaigning as “war prone” (Lee, 2004:267, fn). Gweon argues that this victory reflected a fundamental shift in favor of a younger generation that views the U.S. role in the peninsula in an increasingly critical light (Gweon, 2004:160). This does not imply that Roh is a left-wing anti-American. His main concern has been with the increasing unilateralism of the U.S.—the subordination of Korean interests to U.S. strategic interests—rather than a questioning of the premises of the alliance itself (Moon, 2004:22–23). As Moon notes, as the crisis has unfolded, the

hard line position [of the U.S.] has left South Korea with the impression that the U.S. might have been intentionally delaying its diplomatic action in order to trap North Korea, so that it could justify hard-line options, including a military one. (Moon, 2004:26)

As with South Korea, there was increasing evidence of change in the U.S.–Japan alliance. The Bush administration has maintained the post-Cold War strategy of the U.S. to return Japan to “normal” power status (Weston, 2004:46). But normal

Great Powers exercise autonomy in defense of their interests, and Gilbert Rozman characterizes Japan as “a country repeatedly striving to gain an independent voice on matters of East Asian security” (Rozman, 2003:528). This creates a deep paradox in U.S.–Japanese relations, in which the U.S. encourages Japan to break free of its constraints but cannot resist the impulse to control the choices it makes. As Rozman argues, Japan is wary whether the U.S. distances itself too much or draws close too much and “always it is assumed that U.S. policy will pose barriers to Japan’s pursuit of its own national interests” (Rozman, 2003:539). The U.S.–Japanese interaction over the nuclear crisis exemplifies this paradox. On August 27, 2002, the Japanese government announced that PM Koizumi would make the first ever visit by a Japanese leader to the DPRK in mid-September. Despite the fact that negotiations had been taking place between Japan and North Korea for close to a year, the U.S. was told of the visit only three days before the public announcement. It is not hard to understand the Japanese government’s desire for discretion. As Kaseda makes clear,

Among the major actors, Washington was most responsible for the summit, although it did not intend to do so. To be more specific, the hard-line policy of the Bush administration raised the security concerns of Tokyo as well as Pyongyang and prompted them to hold a summit. (Kaseda, 2003:125)

It was only at this stage that the U.S. briefed the Japanese government about their concerns about the changes to the North Korean nuclear program. Koizumi had no possibility of discussing this at the summit because Pyongyang ruled it a bilateral issue between the U.S. and the DPRK (Pollack, 2003:35). But in most other dimensions the summit was a considerable success for Japan. North Korea accepted most of its demands, including a full admission that it had engaged in the kidnapping of Japanese citizens as part of its covert operations during the Cold War. Despite this revelation, the two sides reached some degree of rapprochement:

Both leaders confirmed the shared recognition that establishing a fruitful political, economic and cultural relationship between Japan and the DPRK through the settlement of unfortunate past between them and the outstanding issues of concern would be consistent with the fundamental interests of both sides, and would greatly contribute to the peace and stability of the region. (MOFA, 2003)

Pyongyang’s willingness to make concessions to Japan was driven above all by its economic crisis. Japan was prepared to attach a significant financial settlement to the normalization of relations—nominally in compensation for the years of colonial rule but more practically for the de-securitization of the bilateral relationship. If Pyongyang had gained access to official funding from Japan, this would in itself have impacted greatly on the regional order, as Zhebin notes:

The realisation of the declaration signed as a result of the visit would have put an end to the system of economic sanctions and blockades of the DPRK, created by the USA and imposed by its allies since the 50s of the preceding century. (Zhebin, 2004:9)

In the event, Koizumi’s attempt to advance an independent policy toward North Korea faced the combined pressure of the reaction of Japanese public and parliamentary opinion to the kidnapping confession and the revival of the crisis surrounding North Korea’s nuclear status. As with South Korea’s engagement policy, this was not an attempt by Japan to undermine the U.S. alliance system in East Asia, to which Tokyo remains strongly committed. It was a reflection of the divergence of interests within the alliance system, and the increasing willingness of Seoul and Tokyo to act on these differences. In the case of both South Korea and Japan, the

source of divergence was the same: the tension between their regional interests and interpretations of the desirability and possibility of regional change, and the regional consequences of U.S. strategic doctrine. It was in this sense that the crisis was not a crisis for Washington. The unravelling of the AF reduced the options for independent action by its allies, but increased its own room for maneuver, notably at the strategic level. The sustainability of this policy—making regional allies pay the price for what the U.S. perceives as strategic imperatives—is, of course, at the core of the present debate about U.S. grand strategy.

Only a week after the Koizumi–Kim summit of September 17, the U.S. announced that Assistant Secretary of State Kelly would visit North Korea on October 3–5. In the meetings, Kelly first charged North Korea of being in breach of its international obligations by pursuing the Highly Enriched Uranium program, stating that there would be no further engagement until the program was dismantled. According to Kelly, the DPRK officials at first strenuously denied the existence of this program but in the final meeting admitted its existence and that they considered the AF to be “nullified” (Pollack, 2003:36). The results of the Kelly visit were not made public until the evening of October 15 after Congress approved the administration’s Iraq policy. In their response of October 25, the DPRK disputed the U.S. version of events. They said that their policy had been to “neither confirm nor deny” the program and that it was U.S. actions that had led to the end of the Framework (Pollack, 2003:36). The U.S. suspended the oil shipments under the AF in November 2002. In December, the DPRK expelled the IAEA inspectors and breached the seals on the Yongbyon plant. On January 10, 2003, the DPRK withdrew from the NPT, the only country to ever do so.

#### *China and the Korean Crisis*

North Korea is the only country with which China still maintains an alliance, agreed in 1961. But China interprets its commitment to the defense of North Korea to be operative only if the attack is unprovoked (Kim, 2001:36). China has much more significant strategic goals that take precedence over the alliance commitment, a fact that Pyongyang understands only too well. When relations between China and North Korea improved in 1999 after the long chill induced by Beijing–Seoul normalization, the catalyst was Beijing’s re-interpretation of U.S. posture in the wake of the Yugoslav war, the bombing of the Belgrade embassy, and the general deterioration of the Sino–U.S. relationship (Kim, 2002:31). Following the “re-normalization” of the Beijing–Pyongyang relationship in 1999, Beijing looked on with approval at the epochal inter-Korean summit. Kim argues,

More than any other major power, China has most to gain, at least in the short run, from the inter-Korean rapprochement process that the June 2000 Pyongyang summit reflected and effected. As Kim Jong-Il’s visit to Beijing a couple of weeks before the summit underscores, Beijing was back in the centre of peninsular affairs as facilitator and cheerleader, if not honest broker. (Kim, 2002:32)

At least one question mark over Beijing’s brokerage must relate to its attitude to the desirability of Korean unification. China is usually portrayed as the most committed supporter of the status quo of all the Northeast Asian powers but this does depend on the assumption that the status quo is sustainable, and that certain post-unification scenarios might not be preferable to Beijing. China’s approach to the peninsula is thus much influenced by time. The status quo is the preferred option until it becomes clear to China that change will be in its interests. Beijing’s policy of opening to Seoul while trying to sustain the relationship with Pyongyang has been dictated by its concern that change now might mean a post-unification Korea

becoming part of a China containment system (You, 2001:396). It is this policy of postponing change until it can be managed that has been the basis of the Beijing–Seoul rapprochement and the source of the Beijing–Pyongyang friction. In China’s view, Seoul acts as a constraint on both Pyongyang and Washington while Pyongyang’s provocations weaken South Korea’s attempts to assert its independence and serve to draw the U.S. in. In this way, Pyongyang’s behavior strengthens the U.S. alliance system and prevents the emergence of balanced multilateralism:

North Korea fearing an invasion by the U.S., Japan and South Korea has intensified the development of nuclear weapons, and the U.S., Japan, and South Korea are developing the TMD plan to guard against a nuclear missile attack; the U.S. and Japan proceeding from a China containment consideration have strengthened the U.S.-Japan alliance on the pretext of the “China threat,” China proceeding from consideration of its own security has no choice but to moderately increase its military power. This situation is strongly related to the current lack of a stable security system in the Northeast Asia region. (Li, 2003:4)

Samuel Kim says that in the two triangles—Beijing–Seoul–Washington and Beijing–Seoul–Pyongyang—China and South Korea have promoted their bilateral linkage at the expense of the third party (Kim, 2003:11), but this has left them with the problem of how to deal with the unilateralist tendencies that the other parties exhibit. China’s capacity to restrain North Korea is greatly limited by a host of factors, mostly derived from the insularity of the North Korean system. But it also cannot apply its principal sanction—the withdrawal of economic support—without provoking the very thing it hopes to most avoid: uncontrolled change on the peninsula. North Korea, for its part, continues to follow a contradictory route. It has finally shown some understanding of the importance of reform and opening (Kang, 2003d:7–8) but at the same time seems unable to abandon the threat-engagement cycle even though this tactic is highly corrosive of the foundations of the Sino–DPRK alliance (Han, 2004:171).

Until 2002, China regarded the crisis as having a bilateral character and it clearly hoped that the U.S. and DPRK might return to some negotiated framework, if not the 1994 agreement. But in 2003, it stepped into the role of crisis management (Kim, 2003:14–15). In March, a leading group on the crisis was formed by President Hu Jintao, who has taken a direct role in the management of China’s policy. The first step was to dispatch Vice Premier Qian Qichen to Pyongyang to force North Korea to abandon its insistence on bilateral talks with the U.S. Qian’s assertive diplomacy—plus reported disruption to the North Korean oil supply—brought about agreement (BBCMO, 2003d). China subsequently convened three sets of multilateral negotiations: three-way talks between U.S., DPRK, and China in April 2003, and six-way talks with Japan, South Korea, and Russia added in August 2003 and February 2004. Working groups from the six powers met from May 2004. Despite this resort to multilateralism, the main focus of China’s policy has remained bilateral: trying to bring the U.S. and North Korea together in such circumstances as to produce a return to the status quo ante. The United States has actively encouraged China to take on the role of manager in this process. At the time of his February 2002 summit in Beijing—that is, after the State of the Union speech but 8 months before the Kelly visit—President Bush called on China’s intervention:

If he [Jiang Zemin] chooses and if he speaks to the leader of North Korea, he can assure him that I am sincere in my desire to have our folks meet. . . . My point is that not every theatre in the war against terror may be resolved with force. Some theatres can be resolved through diplomacy and dialogue. And the Chinese government can be very helpful. (BBCMO, 2002a)

In an interview in April 2003, Defence Secretary Rumsfeld, as ever inclined to speak his mind, went one stage further and suggested that “China’s cooperative behavior” on the Korean crisis had become a litmus test of the new Sino–U.S. relationship (Kim, 2003:15).

Prior to the first round of tripartite talks, the U.S., Japanese and South Korean sides consulted in Washington under the TCOG mechanism and the U.S. decision to enter talks without the participation of the ROK and Japan was considered a concession to Beijing. The U.S. position has remained that it would not accept a re-freezing of the DPRK’s nuclear program but only its dismantling (BBCMO, 2003f), or what has become known as CVID: complete verifiable irreversible dismantlement. After the talks in April were inconclusive, the U.S. pressed for the widening of the multilateral base to include Japan and the ROK. Pyongyang was to agree to this but only after extracting a high price from China. The Hong Kong press reported that in July, Hu Jintao sent a personal envoy, Vice Foreign Minister and former head of the International Liaison Department of the CCP, Dai Bingguo, to Pyongyang to persuade Kim Jong-Il to agree to talks. The North Koreans only accepted, the Hong Kong press said, in exchange for aid equivalent to the Chinese central government’s support to a Chinese province. On July 16, after reporting to Beijing, Dai Bingguo traveled to the U.S. where he had consultations with Cheney, Powell, and others (BBCMO, 2003k). Close to two weeks later, North Korea was to accept the extension of the negotiations to six parties.

The closeness of consultations between the U.S. and China over the coming months should not disguise how far apart the intentions of the two countries are with regard to the Korean peninsula. For China, the resort to multilateralism has now become not a single-issue process option but the beginning of a wider movement to transform the regional security order.

Practically, the question of first importance is that the U.S. should actively abandon its inclination to arrange the security system of the Korean peninsula solely on the basis of its hegemonic mentality and the threat of the use of force as an approach, treating China and other countries that are not U.S. allies more equally. Both sides of the peninsula, North and South, should abandon Cold War thinking, strengthen economic co-operation and develop security dialogue, steadily reinforcing for themselves confidence and trust. China and other countries must also strengthen security dialogue and interaction with the U.S. and its allies, adding to mutual understanding and trust, combining on this basis to build up a multilateral co-operative security system. Otherwise everything will lead to empty talk. (Li, 2003)

This view of regional multilateralism, as it questions the usefulness of the U.S. alliance and forward deployment systems, is fundamentally at odds with Washington’s security doctrine for the region. China and the U.S. have embraced the same means—multilateralism—over the Korean question, but for very different ends. At the same time, some Chinese analysts have enough foresight to recognize that it will not be possible to inaugurate a new regional security order without also altering China’s fundamental relationships, including that with North Korea. Effective multilateralism dictates that all sides must place limits on their privileging of certain relations over others. If China wishes to shift the U.S. bilateralism to multilateralism, it must be prepared to do the same:

Peaceful resolution of the Korean nuclear problem will establish a new model for multilateral negotiated resolution of international conflicts, causing the peaceful eclipse (*anran shise*) of unilateralism. But revising the China-Korea Treaty will make an important contribution to establishing this new model. This is absolutely not to cater to the U.S., but to help the U.S. bid farewell to hegemonism. (Shen, 2003:58)

*Russia and the Korean Crisis*

Russia's participation in the August 2003 talks represented a dramatic return to involvement in peninsular diplomacy. As China balanced and expanded its engagement with the two Koreas in the 1990s, Russia closed off the Pyongyang connection and struggled to build the relationship with Seoul. Russia was sidelined in the AF process of 1994 as the U.S. used China to influence the DPRK and resisted Russian inclusion in the international negotiations (Buszynski, 2000:413). In the four-way talks on negotiating a Peace Treaty for the peninsula, which began as an ROK initiative in 1995, both Russia and Japan made claims for their involvement. Russia proposed an international conference and Japan resumed negotiation on normalization with the DPRK (Zhao, 2001:673). In 1998–1999, Kim Dae-jung attempted to build a six-way framework including Russia and Japan alongside the four-way framework but without success (Buszynski, 2000:413). Moscow's marginalization persisted until the arrival of the Putin administration.

There were both general and immediate causes for the attempt to re-establish Russia's position on the peninsula. As with China's reinvigoration of the Pyongyang relationship, the immediate cause was concern with the U.S. In the face of the U.S.–Japanese decision to press ahead with TMD, Putin visited Pyongyang in July 2000 in the hope of restraining North Korea in its missile development (Ferguson, 2003:42), but the North had already promised no further testing in 1999 with no evident effect on TMD plans. Further Russian–DPRK summits followed in August 2001 in Moscow and in August 2002 in Vladivostok. Putin also paid a visit to South Korea in February 2001 primarily to try and boost economic cooperation. Samuel Kim notes that in the “muscular” Moscow declaration of August 2001, four out of the eight points are designed to send a strong message to the U.S.: “a just new world order”; the 1972 ABM Treaty as a cornerstone of strategic stability; Korean unification without external interference; and withdrawal of U.S. forces from South Korea as a “pressing issue,” on which Putin expressed his understanding (Kim, 2002:38).

The general cause for the reinvigoration of Russian diplomacy is that Russia must use the Korean connection because—in the absence of a breakthrough in relations with Tokyo—it otherwise voluntarily confines its Northeast Asian strategy to a China–Asia route. Or even more explicitly, its East Asia policy becomes a China policy. Writing in 2001, Wishnick argued that in all the official statements defining their willingness to cooperate on Asian security, Russia and China failed to mention the Korean peninsula and that this points to fundamental differences of interest. China had not sought to include Russia in the emergent multilateralism of the 1990s and Putin resorted to high-level diplomacy in part as compensation. China and Russia, in this view, have competing interests on the peninsula, not least because China is a stauncher advocate of the status quo than Russia (Wishnick, 2001:819). The question of how far Russia and China have competing or complementary interests with the two Koreas deserves close scrutiny. A first point to be noted is that Russia will have to cover considerable ground before it can match China for influence with either state. What is equally true is that both Koreas now welcome Russian participation in peninsular affairs, as a counterweight to the other powers: the U.S. (South Korea), Japan (North Korea), and China (South and North Korea). In the present crisis, Russia and China have been consistent in arguing that their interests are close to identical, as will be discussed below. But what of the crucial issue of the alignment of post-unification Korea? Alexander Lukin indicates the delicacy of Russian calculations:

From the geopolitical point of view, a rising stronger Korea also answers the interests of Russia. As is known, Russia has serious territorial issues with Japan, hindering the development of relations with that country. Certain circles in Moscow and the East of the country warn that the rapidly developing China of today

might become a geopolitical threat to Russia. Russia has no such problems with Korea and might expect that a unified Korea might represent a useful counterweight to Japanese and Chinese influence in the region. Looking at the complex history of Korea-Japan and Korea-China relations, in all probability relations with Russia would have an equivalent geopolitical significance for a unified Korea. Moreover, a unified Korea (in contrast to the current South) would not be under the constant threat of aggression from the North, so that its interest in the American defensive shield would significantly diminish, and its foreign policy become more independent. (Lukin, 2002:70)

This “Finlandization” of the Korean problem is conventionally taken to be in opposition to Chinese interests, although it is one that Koreans themselves might be happy to embrace. As argued above, this presupposes that China thinks the status quo tenable and that it views Korean independence as a poor alternative. It may be that neither of these propositions is still firmly held in Beijing and this conclusion can only have strengthened with the emergence of the pre-emption doctrine—Beijing must intervene to resist change if it can but to shape change if it cannot. A vision of a stable, unified, denuclearized Korea with an independent foreign policy is now perhaps one that China and Russia can share.

In contrast to China, Russia has consistently advocated a multilateral approach to the problem of Northeast Asian security including its Korean dimension (BBCMO, 2001c). The problem that Russia has faced is that its engagement with any power in the region is often interpreted by third parties as being directed against them. It has rarely been regarded as being in Northeast Asia of right, but as an instrumental factor in other bilateral relationships. The success of Putin’s diplomacy has been to restore a degree of influence over Pyongyang without alienating Seoul. North Korea not only needs to restore its supply of traditional resources—energy and weaponry—from Russia but also widen its diplomatic base. But this is a very different arrangement from Soviet times. Moscow has no intention of letting Pyongyang add to its \$3.8 billion dollar debt, and arms transfers have been constrained both by Pyongyang’s capacity to pay and the need to consider the interests of Seoul (Yoo, 2003). Despite the limits of this relationship, Pyongyang still values the Moscow connection. It would prefer to deal bilaterally with the U.S. which gives maximum leverage to its negotiating strategy, but confronted with the U.S.–Japan–ROK alliance, it needs whatever forms of flexibility it can develop. In particular, if Pyongyang cannot extend its engagement beyond Beijing, China gains undue influence in brokering inter-Korean rapprochement (You, 2001:394). At the outbreak of the crisis in December 2002, Russia saw the opportunity to reactivate its plans for six-party multilateralism that had been ignored because of the existence of the AF and the Peace Treaty negotiations. With the collapse of both these frameworks, Russia called for a new settlement, the cornerstone of which was reputed to be a three-way guarantee for North Korean security, placing Russia on an equal footing with the U.S. and China in stabilizing the peninsula. The focus of Russian diplomacy has been on utilizing its relationship with Pyongyang to activate this multilateral strategy. A Chinese assessment:

After North Korea declared it would restore the construction of nuclear facilities Russia publicly presented a “gentle diplomacy” toward Korea (this is the implied Russian meaning of *tikhaya diplomatiya*; the literal meaning in translation is “quiet diplomacy” but here the extended meaning appears more appropriate) of five principles [since] focus on the nuclear crisis; stand for non-nuclearisation; abide by the 1994 framework agreement; negotiate a settlement of the problem; and sustain North-South dialogue. These policies accorded with the aspirations of the countries surrounding North Korea and one after another they consulted with Russia on the North Korean nuclear problem. (Li, 2003:11)

When the crisis unfolded, therefore, after October 2002, Russia and China had converged on a common strategy of multilateral diplomacy by different routes. It remained to be seen whether their policies had similarly converged.

*Russian and Chinese Policy Convergence*

In December 2002, at the time the AF finally collapsed, the Russian press was already carrying reports of Russian and Chinese cooperation to prevent an escalation of the crisis. Sergei Strokan declared in *Kommersant*: “on the Korean peninsula the American scythe has been blunted on the Russian–Chinese rock” (BBCMO, 2002c). This clearly misjudged the complexity and delicacy of the evolving policy positions but not the degree of consultation between Moscow and Beijing. Throughout 2003, reports from both sides emphasized the consistency of the process: at the time of the North Korean withdrawal from the NPT; at the time of the three-party talks in Beijing in April; in July when the two countries blocked a U.S. Security Council resolution condemning North Korea for leaving the NPT; and in the run-up to the widened negotiations in August (BBCMO, 2003a, e, g, j). A key indicator of Russian and Chinese policy convergence was the joint statement on North Korea released by the foreign ministers in February 2003 on a platform of a nuclear-free Korean peninsula, non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction on the peninsula, and safeguarding peace, security, and stability in the region. The two sides noted:

the DPRK’s statement that it has no intention of developing nuclear weapons and the statements by the United States and DPRK that they are willing to resolve relevant problems peacefully... The two sides reiterated that China and Russia are willing to do their utmost to push for a dialogue between the DPRK and the United States and are willing to actively push for a political resolution of the DPRK’s nuclear issue in both bilateral and multilateral areas in an effort to safeguard peace and stability in the Asia-Pacific Region. China and Russia are willing to continuously develop friendly and good-neighborly relations and co-operation with the DPRK and the Republic of Korea. (BBCMO, 2003b)

The crucial question was whether Russia accepted Chinese assurances that the trilateral process on which Beijing embarked after March 2003 stood more chance of success rather than widening to admit Moscow’s direct participation. The main focus for Russia in the first half of the year seemed to be to shore up Chinese efforts to encourage North Korea to make concessions by providing external security guarantees. At the time of the April 2003 Beijing negotiations, the two countries offered joint guarantees to Pyongyang, only to have these rejected. Deputy Foreign Minister Losyukov accepted North Korea’s argument that such guarantees would be meaningless if they were not accompanied by a similar commitment from the U.S. (BBCMO, 2003c); but Russia’s position remained that it was willing to offer guarantees with other countries if the U.S. participated. A key role in maintaining the Beijing–Moscow cooperation was played by Hu Jintao’s envoy, Dai Bingguo. Dai visited Moscow for talks before the crucial visits to Pyongyang and Washington in July (BBCMO, 2003h). In the wake of his visit, Losyukov was asked whether there was a three-way process—U.S.–Russia–China—in resolving the crisis, and replied firmly in the negative. His summary of the position was:

The intentions of the sides can only come to light in the process of negotiations. But the USA did not rush to begin negotiations, hoping to win over other countries to exert pressure on the North Koreans. The position of the Chinese coincides practically 100% with ours, this was confirmed in our meeting with Dai Bingguo in Moscow before his visit to Pyongyang. Talking to the Americans and the Koreans, the Chinese have completely correctly stated that this was our

common agreed position. The Chinese also think that any format of negotiations will be good if it gets them underway. But they think that it would be better to continue as they began in Beijing in April. And we agree with them. (Labetskaya, 2003)

The Russian and Chinese view that the crisis was essentially a bilateral issue between the DPRK and the U.S. came under increasing pressure throughout the summer as the U.S. sought to widen the participation in the negotiations. By bringing South Korea and Japan to the table, the U.S. hoped to exert maximum pressure on North Korea and bind them tightly to itself in terms of policy. There was little prospect of getting Pyongyang to accept this widening of the negotiating format, save as part of a trade-off that would bring in Russia as well. Losyukov had proposed to Dai in the meeting in July that Russia would enter the negotiations as a counterweight, and Dai took this message to Pyongyang as part of the package to get the North Koreans to accept the widening of the negotiating base (Labetskaya, 2003). Pyongyang was to accept the widening of the talks on July 31. Pyongyang allowed Moscow to announce that it had accepted the proposal, and the U.S. State Department confirmed that this was consistent with what President Hu Jintao had told President Bush in a telephone conversation the preceding day (BBCMO, 2003i). Zhebin's assessment is that Pyongyang was at least as concerned with gaining leverage over Beijing as Washington:

Turning to Moscow Pyongyang in fact openly signalled that it no longer trusted Beijing as its ally and defender. In trying to contrast the pragmatism of China with the magnanimity of Russia, the North Koreans obviously hoped to awaken the former sharp rivalry between Korea's two neighboring giants. (Zhebin, 2004:18)

The first round of talks convened on August 27–29, 2003, but ended without conclusion other than that they would continue. The U.S. and North Korea had bilateral discussions within the context of the consultations but neither would move from their defined positions: that the North must dismantle its nuclear program as a precondition of normalization or that the U.S. must sign a non-aggression treaty in exchange for which “the DPRK will not manufacture nuclear weapons and allow inspection, realize the ultimate dismantlement of nuclear facilities and stop the export and experiment of missiles” (*China Daily*, August 28, 2003). The second round was conducted from February 25 to 28, 2004, but proved no more conclusive in bridging the gap between freeze and dismantlement. On April 19, 2004 in Beijing, Kim Jong-il had his first meeting with Hu Jintao since the crisis began. The Chinese prompted the North Koreans to take a more flexible negotiating position in the May working group meeting and the third round of six-party talks scheduled for June (BBCMO, 2004).

It is possible that a return to some framework will emerge in the medium term but at the moment, neither the U.S. nor the DPRK seem to have any inclination to shift their fundamental positions. The six-party talks have essentially become a holding pattern that prevents further deterioration but does not yet look to be able to provide any lasting solution. North Korea has achieved its main objectives. It has rallied support, notably from China and Russia, which re-establishes a minimum form of external guarantee for its survival. It can proceed with its nuclear and missile programs although even now no one knows whether or under what circumstances this might emerge as a demonstrable nuclear deterrent. Despite the fact that the U.S. is no closer to CVID than in October 2002, Washington seems content with its diplomacy, believing that it has at least met its immediate goal: there will be no shift in the relationship between the DPRK and the United States' allies, such as could radically alter the material and psychological underpinnings of the Northeast

Asian security order. In this view, pushing Pyongyang back into the embrace of Beijing and Moscow is not a bad thing as North Korea is now wedged between its opponents in the U.S.-led alliances and its “supporters.”

How long this holding pattern can be sustained is much harder to assess. The pressures for change in the regional order, evident since the formal demise of bipolarity, are building. The Korean peninsula has become, as in the past, both the test case of where the regional powers stand in relation to promoting or resisting change, and a potential catalyst for change itself. At least one outcome may be that Northeast Asia becomes a more “normal” region, making a shift from imbalanced bilateralism to more equal multilateralism, as this Russian assessment suggests:

In China they hope that the six-sided negotiations on Korea become the beginning of the establishment of an unprecedented regional structure, destined to decide both the economic and political problems of Northeast Asia—the example for which has been shown by the evolution of the “Shanghai five” in the Shanghai Co-operation Organisation. For all, and especially for Beijing, the unwanted precedent is the exploitation of the developing regional mechanism by the United States for the imposition of unilateral decisions. In Moscow it is also understood that it is not only a question of the North Korean bomb but the geopolitical map of the regional future. In this situation Russia cannot be a non-participating observer or an intermediary between Pyongyang and Washington, and even more cannot occupy a position of supporting one of the sides. The settlement of the crisis by the path of real compromise accounting for the legitimate needs of all interested sides—this is not a concession to nuclear blackmail but a resolution answering each of our own national interests. (Bulychev, 2004)

### Conclusion

This paper has advanced two sets of arguments: one set theoretical, regarding the relationship between regional orders and systemic polarity, and the other analytical, assessing how we should understand the evolution of the foreign policy positions of the Great Powers in Northeast Asia. These two sets of arguments are tied together by the role of the Great Powers that provide the linkage between regional ordering and systemic polarity. This permits the central claim of the paper that unipolarity only makes sense if one disregards regional-level dynamics. As soon as one looks at the regional level, unipolarity loses most of its explanatory value. Notably, regional multipolarity and systemic unipolarity are contradictory: a system that exhibits multipolarization at the regional level cannot be characterized as unipolar at the global level. This also shapes the assessment of U.S. capabilities in hegemonic management. The paper argues that polarity is a configuration of power, and hegemony an exercise of power where sovereignty and the use of force are conditional on hegemonic choice. The role of polarity to hegemony is thus permissive: only certain configurations of power permit risk-free conditionality of force and sovereignty. Unipolarity implies wide parameters for the U.S. to engage in hegemonic behavior but this is not the case in East Asia. The problems of the region are too complex and the configurations of power too interlocking to permit overt hegemonic behavior. If anything, the region demonstrates the opposing tendency and the weakening of U.S. capabilities in hegemonic management.

This has nothing to do with realism: many realists regard the unipolar position as mythic largely because it disregards subsystem dynamics. This paper rejects the unipolar position on the same grounds but goes on to question realism as an explanation of what is happening at the regional level in East Asia because distribution of material capability seems inadequate as an explanation of regional change. It advances a concept of regional order—concert—that seeks to combine material and normative dispositions. There is a significant amount of material

equilibrium in East Asia, but the order also rests upon norms of interest and identity. Thus, shifts in material dispositions are compensated for by adjustments in how powers interpret their interest structures and how they understand the regional role of others. Conversely, material re-ordering is a response to changing identity and interest structures. This is not only a balancing order but an order in balance—powers do not just adjust against individual states but against the order as a whole. The term concert is used to indicate both the unity of the actors and the compensating interaction of their material and normative dispositions.

We can interpret the behavior of all powers in Northeast Asia within the concept of concert but the most pressing questions relate to North Korea and the U.S. North Korea's nuclearization strategy has been both engendered and constrained by this environment. It is an attempt to compensate for its failure to sustain its position in the regional order and it is also parasitic, using threats to draw in the resources that it cannot gain by other means. Yet, such anti-social behavior provokes restraining responses from the other powers. The U.S. continues to point to material capabilities and material threats as the basis for its regional management system but it is no longer in control of the interest and identity formulations even within its own alliances. Indeed, the possibility that the U.S. might itself abandon the prevailing consensus and resort to force is itself a factor in reshaping South Korean and Japanese regional roles. The North Korean threat serves to validate the U.S. focus on material factors and it is not impossible that the U.S. will use force to solve the proliferation problem, but this would be an enormously hazardous undertaking that would be at least as likely to accelerate the transition from bilateralism to multilateralism as delay it.

The Sino-Russian partnership is emerging as a core test of the linkage between Great-Power relationships and systemic polarity: strategic partnerships, regional ordering, and systemic multipolarization are interlocking projects. But the compatibility of Russian and Chinese visions on these political constructions does not pre-determine the interaction of their interests, for example, on particular regional problems, nor does it yet provide consistent leverage in their relations with the U.S. Thus, Russia and China have resisted a unilateral U.S. solution to the Korean crisis but there is a problem characterizing this as a success for a broader counter-hegemonic strategy as this imputes too much to Sino-Russian collaboration and too little to the general conditions of concert: it is under these circumstances and dynamics that the collaboration worked. Therefore, for the present, the determining variable at both regional and systemic levels is uncertainty. This is why the Sino-Russian Partnership itself remains so ambiguous—it is both a product of, and a factor in, regional-strategic reconstitution in the post-bipolar system.

Across Eurasia, we find a wide variety of regional orders with diverse material and normative dispositions. States, and Great Powers in particular, debate and contest issues of identity, interest, and the architecture of their relationships—partnerships, orders, and inter-regionalism. In some regions, these forces are undoubtedly permissive of U.S. hegemonic intervention but elsewhere they represent a significant restraint. As a result, it cannot be argued that U.S. policy exists in the “realm of choice” or that distributions of power should be interpreted in a binary relationship between U.S. preponderance in force, wealth, and technology and an atomized international system. Regional and strategic reconstitution is a project to be measured in decades but there is already a lot more balance in the emerging regional-strategic system than the unipolarist position allows.

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