
US AND NORTH KOREA TURN TO RUSSIA FOR MEDIATION

- 16.08.2017

FT, 16 August 2017

When Kim Yong-nam, North Korea's ceremonial leader, attended the Iranian presidential inauguration this month, he flew via Moscow, even though a flight via Beijing would have been much more convenient.

To some observers, the choice of stopover is emblematic of a North Korean regime that seems increasingly estranged from its Chinese ally over its nuclear ambitions and more reliant on longstanding ties with Russia. Pyongyang's shift of attention also creates a potential opening that US diplomats are keen to explore as they search for ways to curb North Korea's fast-developing nuclear missile programme.

The North Koreans are offended with China, and many of their political contacts are either frozen or seriously narrowed, said Valery Sukhinin, Russia's former ambassador to Pyongyang and one of Moscow's most seasoned Korea hands.

North Korean government officials have made several visits to Russia over the past year and sometimes meet at events in Moscow. Some western observers believe that inside North Korea, contacts between Pyongyang officials and Russian diplomats now surpass those with China.

The Trump administration has become frustrated with China's reluctance to use its economic leverage — it accounts for 90 per cent of North Korea's trade — to lean on Kim Jong-un even if it backed a new round of UN sanctions earlier this month.

Even though relations between the US and Russia are poor, Washington has begun to look to Moscow to carry sway in Pyongyang.

You can see the US testing Russian access and influence in North Korea, said a western diplomat. In March and April [US secretary of state Rex] Tillerson was testing Chinese access and influence and that's being tested now with Russia.

This month, Mr Tillerson spoke of China and Russia in the same breath when he said the pair have very good, open channels of communication with Pyongyang.

I'm hopeful that they can use their influence — and I think they do have influence with the regime — to bring them to a point of dialogue, he said.

Moscow has in recent months tried to appear reasonably neutral as tensions rose, warning both sides of the perils of escalating rhetoric. Alongside China, it is pushing for talks based on a

simultaneous suspension of North Korea's nuclear and missile testing and of large joint military exercises by US and South Korean forces.

The US is waiting to see if there's a positive response from Pyongyang or if it's dismissive, to see how much leverage Russia has in terms of bringing them to the table, said the diplomat.

But American expectations that Russia could become a key player in mediating the crisis are treated with scepticism in Moscow.

Russian experts warn that Moscow's support, alongside China, for the latest UN Security Council sanctions on North Korea has undermined what little leverage it had left on its former ally.

More than 17 years ago, Russia replaced the Soviet Union's alliance treaty with North Korea, under which it was required to come to Pyongyang's support in the event of a military attack, with a friendship treaty without this clause.

North Korea had therefore long lowered its expectations towards us. But at least they would not blame or target us in their angry rhetoric, said Mr Sukhinin. But in their most recent statements, Russia was criticised by name for the first time — for bowing to the US and supporting Washington.

He added that US president Donald Trump's public expression of thanks to China and Russia for supporting the last UNSC resolution had been particularly unhelpful. If this continues, they may distance themselves from us, too. They feel isolated, and their response to that is to ratchet up their nuclear programme.

China holds the key to solving the Korean puzzle

Perhaps most importantly, the Kremlin has a radically different assessment from the US of the stand-off over North Korea's nuclear programme. From the Russian government's point of view, the disruptive power in this crisis is still the US, said Alexander Gabuev, an Asia expert at the Carnegie Moscow Centre.

Russian officials see North Korea's obsession with developing nuclear weapons as the understandable attempt of a weak, isolated country to protect itself against a more powerful adversary.

Officially, Moscow refuses to recognise North Korea as a nuclear power, hence its support for UN sanctions. But most Russian foreign policy officials and analysts argue that the only realistic option for defusing the crisis would be a deal granting North Korea the status of a de facto nuclear power similar to that of India and Pakistan — without formal recognition, but without attempts to disarm it either.

Instead of chasing an impossible and unachievable goal of a non-nuclear North Korea, the US and other interested parties should quietly switch to a less pleasant, but realistically achievable goal: North Korea with small and stable nuclear arsenal, Andrei Lankov, a Russian professor at Kookmin University in Seoul, wrote in a commentary on the options for resolving the crisis.

North Koreas goal is to make everyone accept, even if not officially, that it has nuclear weapons now – just like India, Pakistan and Israel. They want to achieve such a status, said Mr Sukhinin. We dont believe that North Korea threatens us or China, but at the same time it is important for us to ensure that this process doesnt broaden further, that there is no more proliferation.

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