

Russia's Relations with China Amidst US-China-Russia Strategic Competition*

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I. Introduction

This study comprehensively examines the development of Russia's strategic relationship with China amidst intensifying strategic competition among the United States, China, and Russia. Specifically, we analyze the fundamental meaning and direction of Russia's strategy toward China in the process of shaping a new global order, and the key features and characteristics of cooperation between the two countries in a wide range of fields spanning politics, diplomacy, security, military, economy, society, and culture. Accordingly, this research aims to draw valuable policy insights for Korea based on evaluation of the direction and level of Russia-China cooperation from the Russian perspective.

In this respect, this study is composed of the following four parts. Part II examines Russia's perception of China and its policy direction, as well as evaluates the prospects of Russia-China relations. Part III conducts an in-depth analysis of the opportunities and constraints associated with Russia-China cooperation in the fields of advanced technology, energy, and finance, which are key strategic areas for strengthening Russia's economic security amidst intense Western sanctions against its economy. In Part IV, we explore the current status and characteristics of cooperation in the fields of education and research, culture and arts, mass media, tourism, etc. Part V presents policy implications for Korea, particularly suggesting promising directions and tasks for the Northern Policy given the major turning point in the changing external environment.

* This is a summary article based on KIEP Research Analyses paper of Park et al. (2022).

II. Russia-China Relations and Future Dynamics

The deterioration of US relations with China and Russia, which is currently unfolding at the global level, is acting as a decisive factor pushing Russia and China closer to each other. As the possibilities and opportunities for concessions, compromises, and cooperation between the United States and the two great powers are gradually decreasing, Russia and China are deepening their partnership under the common banner of ‘anti-Americanism’ and ‘multipolar order.’

The level and nature of Russia-China relations have undergone dramatic changes since Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the subsequent imposition of Western sanctions against Russia. In 2019, marking the 70th anniversary of diplomatic ties, Russia and China upgraded their relations to a comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination for a new era, and agreed to strengthen strategic solidarity and expand all-round cooperation. If Russia and China continue to share common interests while strengthening mutual trust, such as pursuing decisive changes to the post-Cold War order, the international community is likely to face fierce conflict in the near future. The war in Ukraine, which erupted in February 2022, is a critical test.

However, it should not be overlooked that not only opportunity factors (Opposing to US-led unipolar hegemony, securing reliable energy resources, pursuing a multipolar order and

multilateral cooperation, etc.) but also risk factors (Western economic sanctions against Russia and the possible implementation of secondary boycott measures, the inherent limitations of bilateral technical cooperation, etc.) are inherent in Russia-China relations. In addition, the possibility of future changes in international relations can also serve as one of the important influencing factors. In particular, there is potential for fundamental changes in the level and nature of cooperative relations between Russia and China depending on whether the US sets a new foreign policy direction.

III. Russia's Perception of Economic Security and Prospects for Russia-China Economic Cooperation

Throughout the mid-to-late 2010s, the Russian government developed a heightened awareness of economic security due to the intense competition between the US and China, Western sanctions on its economy, the decline in international oil prices, and the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Russian leadership acknowledges economic security as essential for national security and economic sovereignty.

According to the Russia's Economic Security Strategy until 2030 and National Security Strategy, rising uncertainties in external conditions, such as global technology competition, energy transition, and continued and strength-

ened Western economic sanctions, pose significant threats to its economic security. To strengthen economic security, the Russian government is focusing on developing self-reliance in strategic fields such as high-tech, energy, and finance, as well as revitalizing cooperation with non-Western economies. Particularly, Russia highlights the significance of its partnerships with the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), Russian and Chinese-led Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa), and RIC (Russia, India, China) in establishing economic security, with a strong emphasis on its solid partnership with China.

Russia witnessed the expansion of its economic relations with China in various domains during the tenure of Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping. In particular, Russia accelerated Eurasian cooperation with China (conjugation of the EAEU and the Chinese initiative “One Belt, One Road”) after the Crimean Peninsula crisis in 2014, and in June 2019, it developed bilateral relations into a “comprehensive partnership and strategic cooperation in a new era” to mark the 70th anniversary of diplomatic ties. Furthermore, in light of the war in Ukraine, China has become a crucial country for Russia, serving as the sole supplier of necessary goods and a potential consumer market for its energy in the face of Western restrictions.

In this context, cooperation with China is essential for Russia to develop high-tech, energy, and financial sectors, which are key strategic

areas for strengthening economic security. Naturally, Russian-Chinese economic relations are influenced by not only opportunity factors but also constraints. However, as long as Western sanctions against Russia continue, strengthening economic cooperation with China will be the most important task for Russia.

IV. Russia-China Socio-Cultural Cooperation and Its Meaning

In June 2019, the leaders of Russia and China signed a joint statement on the development of comprehensive partnership and strategic cooperation. In the statement, the two countries identified “humanities exchange,” meaning the development of social and cultural relations, as one of the priorities for the development of comprehensive strategic partnership. Regarding the development of social and cultural relations, the two countries aimed to uphold the longstanding tradition of friendship, strengthen people-to-people ties, and promote cultural enlightenment and prosperity of Russian and Chinese civilizations.

The main drivers of the Russian government's active social and cultural cooperation with China are as follows. Firstly, it is to secure public support for the development of comprehensive and strategic relations with China, especially for bolstering cooperation at the political and economic level. Secondly, it aims to strengthen 'soft power' in the international arena by ameliorating its negative image.

V. Implications for Korea

The ongoing conflict and confrontation between the US and the two great powers is unlikely to be resolved in the short and medium term. If the Cold War confrontation between the West and Russia persists, it could have a significant impact on the situation on the Korean Peninsula, including inter-Korean relations, as well as Korea's overall foreign policy and promotion of its Northern Policy.

Amidst changing international environment, Korea faces significant challenges in promoting its Northern Policy and shaping its policy toward Russia. In particular, this is a major issue closely tied to Korea's geopolitical reality. In other words, it is a question of how to coordinate cooperation between US-led maritime allies (Korea, US, Japan) and continental forces

(Russia, China) bordering the Korean Peninsula to safeguard Korea's national interests. In that context, Korea should pursue foreign policy directions that can actively respond to these changes in the external environment.

Accordingly, this study presents the following policy directions and tasks to establish the basic direction of Northern Policy and ensure stable management of relations with Russia in the new international environment. These include establishing a cooperative environment to ensure stable management of Korean Peninsula issues, developing a cooperative model to secure external status as a “pivotal middle power,” prioritizing national interests at a strategic level including securing economic and energy security, and raising social awareness of the strategic value and importance of the northern region, among others. **KIEP**

References

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