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Putin-Kim Summit: Enter the Russian Factor

By Chris Cheang

SYNOPSIS

President Vladimir Putin's meeting with North Korean leader, Kim Jong-un on 25 April 2019 in Vladivostok is not unexpected. It merely confirms that Russia has always had a role in trying to resolve the protracted issue of North Korea's nuclear weapon development. The main purpose of this meeting is to reinforce the message that the US alone cannot influence what Pyongyang will do on denuclearisation.

COMMENTARY

THE LAST summit between Russian and North Korean leaders took place in 2011 when Kim Jong-un's father, Kim Jong-il, travelled to Siberia to meet Dmitry Medvedev, Russia's then president. That Kim Jong-un has agreed to meet Putin should not come as a surprise. Putin had issued an invitation to Kim Jong-un to visit Russia soon after the latter met Donald Trump at their summit in Singapore on 12 June 2018. It is also not surprising that the summit did not lead to any breakthrough on North Korean nuclear weapon development and denuclearisation.

The Putin-Kim summit took place not with a view to attempting a breakthrough. That was obvious from the start. Both sides did not publicise the summit weeks before, unlike Kim's two summits with President Trump. The Kremlin itself officially confirmed Kim's visit only on 18 April with no details or dates of the visit, other than stating in a pithy fashion that he would visit Russia "in the second half of April".

Why the Putin-Kim Vladivostok Summit

While Russia is a key player in the whole issue, the fact remains that only the United States and China could offer North Korea real relief from the sanctions imposed by

the United Nations and the US. Both Putin and Kim know that. But there are at least four reasons why Putin had entered the fray.

First, Putin wanted to show the world, especially the US, that no lasting solution to the issue can be found without Russia's participation. Being a UN Security Council Permanent Member, a nuclear power as well as North Korea's neighbour, denuclearisation cannot happen without Russia's support. The Putin-Kim summit has only reinforced these points. Indeed, the US Special Envoy for North Korea, Stephen Biegun visited Moscow when news of the summit was made known.

Putin stressed at a press conference after the latest summit "it is unlikely that agreements between the two countries will be enough", alluding to the need for international guarantees for North Korea's security. The two countries cited were the US and North Korea. Putin felt that the Six-Party Talks format would certainly be "highly relevant to develop a system of international security guarantees for North Korea."

Launched in 2003, the Six-Party Talks were aimed at ending North Korea's nuclear programme through negotiations involving China, the US, North and South Korea, Japan and Russia but the process ended when North Korea left the negotiations in 2009.

Showing Russia as an Asia-Pacific Power

Second, for the benefit of China, the US, South Korea and Japan which have a direct interest in the issue, Putin also wanted the summit to showcase Russia's great power status and above all, that it is an Asia-Pacific power.

Third, Putin would like to add momentum to international efforts to find an acceptable and sustainable solution to the issue. Maintaining contact and dialogue with Pyongyang therefore is not only logical but also desirable.

Fourth, Russia also does not want a nuclear-armed and unstable North Korea as that would pose a real security threat to its territory should hostilities break out between North Korea and the US and its allies in the region. Moreover, the current situation only provides the US and its allies with more reasons to justify the deployment of missile defence systems in the region. These systems could devalue Russia's strategic nuclear deterrent.

At the press conference, Putin emphasised that Russia also advocated "complete denuclearisation: this is a fact", adding that Russia completely opposed the global proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. He said that Russia had prioritised efforts to reduce the threat of nuclear conflicts, a common priority. Of note, Putin stressed that his impression was that Kim also "shares this viewpoint". All North Korea needed were national security guarantees. Putin's references to North Korea's need for security guarantees imply that Russia remains opposed to any regime change by the US.

Russia's Limited Economic Leverage

Finally, since Russia has very limited economic leverage over North Korea, compared to China, Russia will not exercise economic pressure on Pyongyang. However, it is in Russia's interest to try to revive economic projects stalled by sanctions and the summit provided a good opportunity to raise them with Kim Jong-un.

These projects revolve around Russia's proposals to establish rail links with both Koreas and a gas pipeline to South Korea running through the North's territory as well as the possible construction of electric power lines.

Putin referred to these projects in the press conference, pointing out that they were also in South Korea's interest while alluding to Seoul's difficulties in making decisions. In a somewhat sarcastic tone, Putin said that "apparently, there is a shortage of sovereignty during the adoption of final decisions, and the Republic of Korea has certain allied obligations before the US". He made it plain that implementation of these projects "would create essential conditions for increasing trust, which is vitally needed to resolve various problems".

On his part, Kim needed to balance his contacts and relations with China, the US and South Korea. After all, he had met President Xi Jinping, President Trump and President Moon Jae-in several times in the past one year. His summit with Putin was therefore long overdue and part of Pyongyang's balancing act. Kim also wanted to show his people his growing international stature, having met the leaders of the US, China and Russia in a relatively short time.

What It Means for ASEAN

Any reduction of tensions in Northeast Asia would benefit Southeast Asia as well. That Russia is playing its part to lessen these tensions by holding a summit with North Korea is only to be welcomed. ASEAN should expect Russia to continue playing a positive role in maintaining peace and stability in the region.

ASEAN may need to revisit its position on the Six-Party Talks as this subject may be raised by the Russian side at future ASEAN Plus settings like the East Asia Summit and the ASEAN Regional Forum.

Chris Cheang is a Senior Fellow with the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore. He was a diplomat in the Singapore Embassy in Moscow for three terms between 1994 and 2013 before retiring in September 2017.

Nanyang Technological University

Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798
Tel: +65 6790 6982 | Fax: +65 6794 0617 | www.rsis.edu.sg