

Why is Russia Favored by Mongolia and North Korea?

by Jargalsaikhan Mendee

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Russia is favored by Mongolia and North Korea just as the United States is welcomed by some of its Southeast Asian partners. At the same time, Mongolia and especially North Korea provide opportunities for Russia to raise its stakes in Northeast Asian matters.

Despite the collapse of the Soviet Union and relative inattention by the Kremlin in the 1990s, Ulaanbaatar and Pyongyang never abandoned their attempts to renew ties with Russia. High-ranking political and military officials constantly made calls to advance political, military, economic, and cultural ties with Moscow. Positive responses came after a decade, under Russian President Putin. Putin's visit to the DPRK and Mongolia in 2000 demonstrated the Kremlin's new emphasis on two its former allies, whose industrial facilities and enterprises were built with Soviet assistance and technology. Their treaties of mutual assistance with Russia were replaced by treaties of good neighborliness in 1993 (Mongolia) and 2001 (North Korea). And the \$11 billion debts incurred during the Soviet era, were resolved favorably for Mongolians in 2003 and North Koreans in 2012. As a result, Russia seems to have secured its stake in key infrastructure development projects. In North Korea, Russia will invest in the trans-Korean railway, a gas pipeline, special economic zones, and education. Russia will invest in the trans-Mongolian railway, its extension, and the mining of uranium and aluminum in Mongolia. Economic cooperation with Mongolia and North Korea will play an important role in Putin's agenda to develop Russia's long-neglected Far East and Siberia and to secure Chinese and East Asian markets for its mineral exports.

Three reasons explain Mongolian and North Korean collaboration with Russia. First, all three fear Chinese demographic expansion. North Korea and Mongolia have always been attentive to the number of Chinese nationals in their countries. Both expelled a significant number of Chinese nationals during the Cultural Revolution and closely monitored those who remained. Mongolia is even more vulnerable than the other two because of its small population - a mere 2.8 million people, a number even smaller than the population of ethnic Mongolians in the PRC. Even during the Soviet period, when both nations welcomed Soviet citizens, most Russians perceived both Mongolia and North Korea as a strange land, culture, and civilization and had no intention of settling down. Chinese are likely to think and act differently.

Mongolia, North Korea, and the Russian Far East are considered the most marginalized and underdeveloped (despite abundant minerals) parts of Northeast Asia. Conversely, China, Japan, and South Korea are seen as economic powerhouses. Although Mongolia and North Korea have the largest mineral deposits, both lack fuel and natural gas; therefore, they long for benefits from the long discussed gas pipelines from Siberia to China and South Korea. At the same time, Russia is the only way for Mongolia and North Korea to reach Eurasian markets and to import fuel and technology. While there are various explanations for North Korea's reluctance to follow the Chinese recipe for economic reform, North Korea, like Mongolia, avoids increasing dependence on Chinese investment, technology, and market. This explains Mongolia's welcoming of Russia in key mining and infrastructure projects while adopting laws against the investment by Chinese state owned enterprises in strategic sectors of its economy. Similarly, Kim Jong Il's visit to Ulan Ude in 2011 after his learning trip to China's northeastern provinces signals a similar desire to get involved with Russia.

All three have distinct geopolitical needs. For Russia, North Korea traditionally provides a strategic buffer from the US and Japan while Mongolia seeks the same insulation from China. Russia's partnership with North Korea increases its ability to deal with South Korea and Japan on economic issues and with the United States on security issues (e.g., NATO expansion, missile defense). Mongolia, similarly, increases Russia's stake in Sino-Russian relations and offers leverage for Moscow when dealing with Beijing. In recent years, Russia has resumed its military assistance to Mongolia quite actively (e.g., training, equipment, exercise). For Mongolia and North Korea, Russia has been the only source of political, economic, and military support in the face of an assertive China. Their learning of Russia culture strengthens their non-Chinese identities.

Finally, unlike Central and Eastern European former communist states, Mongolia and North Korea have positive views of their past ties with Russia, hiccups notwithstanding. Both countries established their state institutions with Russian assistance, while Russians destroyed similar institutions in Central and Eastern European states. And, Mongolia and North Korea became members of the current international system with Soviet backing in 1961 and 1991, respectively. At the same time, both desire to formalize ties with the United States and Japan; however only Mongolia succeeded so far, following its political changes in the 1990s.

Although Russia is favored by its non-Chinese East Asian partners, its geostrategic rebalancing is complicated - much like the US "pivot" to the Asia-Pacific region. Russia has the ability to upgrade its Far Eastern military presence, but it cannot engage in intensive security ties with both nations. Any military move would undermine relations with key

investors like China, Japan, and South Korea. Also, assertive moves might push both Mongolia and North Korea closer to China. Like the United States, Russia faces economic turbulence. However, Russia remains the most approachable and understandable partner for Mongolian and North Korean political elites and public and both nations will serve as Russia's economic gateways to Northeast Asia and a strategic buffer from its traditional competitors.

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