

PUTTING A SPOKE IN THE WHEEL: RUSSIAN EFFORTS TO WEAKEN U.S.-LED ALLIANCE STRUCTURES IN NORTHEAST ASIA

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ABSTRACT

Russia is widely accused of employing a range of instruments—both overt and covert—to undermine Western unity. However, to what extent is Russia engaged in comparable activities to weaken the South Korean and Japanese alliances with the United States? This paper answers this question by assessing Moscow's actions in the domains of diplomacy, information, the military, and the economy. It finds that Russia is indeed aiming to encourage Seoul and Tokyo to distance themselves from Washington and from each other. In particular, Moscow is committed to deterring U.S. allies from facilitating the deployment of additional units of U.S. missile defense systems within the region. Across the four domains, it is only in the economic field that Russia is found to lack leverage. Overall, Moscow has achieved several tactical victories, but has yet to seriously damage U.S.-led alliance structures within the region. All the same, Seoul and Tokyo must remain watchful of Moscow's activities, especially since there are signs of increased cooperation between Russia and China in exploiting wedge issues between the United States and its allies, thereby potentially combining China's economic weight with Russia's skills in influence operations.

Key Words: *Russia, Republic of Korea, Japan, U.S. alliance, subversion*

INTRODUCTION

Much has been written about Russia's efforts to undermine the unity of Western alliances through a combination of military and non-military tools.¹ Examples include regular incursions into the airspace of members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and support for far-right political parties across Europe. Moscow was also found to have interfered in a "sweeping and systematic" manner in the 2016 U.S. presidential election that brought Donald Trump to power and has been accused of promoting the UK's exit from the European Union (EU).²

However, to what extent is Russia engaged in comparable activities toward U.S. allies in Northeast Asia? It is understandable that South Korea and Japan should be lower priority targets than European countries or the United States. After all, Moscow officially publicizes that its main external threat comes from the "build-up of the power potential of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization."³ An additional factor is that South Korea and Japan do not present the same ideological challenge to Moscow since neither seeks to export liberal values of democracy and human rights in the same way as the EU and United States.

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All the same, there is clear logic to why Moscow should also try to exert influence over the foreign policies of South Korea and Japan. To begin with, a key source of U.S. global strength remains its wealth of security partners, and, within this network, there are few allies of greater importance than Japan and South Korea. Undermining U.S. alliances with Seoul and Tokyo therefore weakens the U.S. itself. Second, the presence of U.S. forces in Northeast Asia—in close proximity to Russia’s borders—has long been a concern for Moscow. These forces contributed to the containment of the Soviet Union and their presence is still regarded as a threat, especially given the deployment of U.S. missile defense units in each country, as well as the potential for the U.S. to position new ground-launched, intermediate-range missiles in East Asia following the expiration of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty in August 2019.⁴

So, to what extent is Russia engaged in efforts to undermine Japan and South Korea’s alliances with the United States and what tools is Moscow using? To answer this question, the paper considers Russia’s actions in each of the four classic domains of national power: diplomacy, information, military, and economics (DIME).⁵ It concludes by offering a judgement on the extent of Russia’s activities and the degree to which they have achieved success.

DIPLOMATIC TOOLS

It is tempting to turn immediately to the drama of espionage cases and military saber-rattling. The most important tool of foreign policy influence, however, remains traditional diplomacy, which not only often proves effective in its own right, it helps set the agenda. Russian foreign policy goals towards South Korea and Japan can be divided into longer term ambitions and shorter-term priorities.

Within the first category, the Russian leadership would like to see South Korea and Japan become increasingly self-reliant and to distance themselves from Washington. It is also advantageous for Moscow if tensions between Seoul and Tokyo continue to grow, since an inability of these two U.S. allies to work together weakens the broader U.S.-led alliance system. There is no expectation that the status quo will change quickly, yet Moscow would ultimately like to see Seoul and Tokyo abandon their alliances with the United States in favor of neutrality. According to Artyom Lukin’s

survey of Russian scholarship on the Republic of Korea (ROK) in 2019, Russian strategists have higher hopes for Seoul in this respect, since they see South Korea as “the weak link in the U.S. alliance network in Asia” and the most susceptible to pressure. Considering Russia and China’s shared interests, Lukin claims that:

The likely objective for Beijing and Moscow is Finlandization of South Korea, which means turning it into a neutral state that would refrain from policies that China and Russia deem compromising [to] their security. Finlandization of South Korea, if achieved, would be a major blow to the U.S. positions, both in Northeast Asia and globally.⁶

Sergei Naryshkin, the director of Russia’s Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR), has expressed a similar ambition with regard to Japan. In an interview with a Japanese journalist in February 2020, Naryshkin stated, “In my opinion, Japan should be a neutral country.” He continued by listing Switzerland, Austria, and Sweden as possible models.⁷

When it comes to more immediate goals, Moscow’s priority is to oppose the deployment of units of U.S. missile defense systems on South Korean and Japanese territory. Although Seoul and Tokyo stress that such systems are intended to defend against North Korea, Russia judges such deployments to be part of an expanding U.S. network of global missile defense and, consequently, a threat to Russia’s nuclear deterrent. For this reason, Russian officials have strongly criticized the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system, which was deployed in South Korea in 2017, as well as the Aegis Ashore system, which was planned to be installed in Japan by 2025. Aleksandr Fomin, Russia’s deputy defense minister, has warned that these systems could “provoke an arms race in the region” and will force Russia to consider “possible actions in response.”⁸ As such, the Russian leadership will welcome the Japanese government’s decision on June 15, 2020 to suspend the deployment of the Aegis Ashore system.

In pursuing both elements of this agenda through diplomatic means, Russian officials’ customary narrative is to lament Seoul and Tokyo’s lack of independence. Often, this is delivered in a way designed to goad Korean and Japanese leaders to demonstrate their autonomy from

Washington. For example, in April 2019, President Putin spoke regretfully of South Korea's "deficit of sovereignty."⁹ Similarly, in October 2019, he raised the potential deployment of U.S. intermediate-range missiles in Japan and South Korea, stating:

I think that the United States intentionally does not respond [to our concerns] and the U.S.'s allies cannot respond because in this sense and in this respect their sovereignty is very limited. They simply don't have their own words or their own opinions on this question.¹⁰

Additionally, Russia has sought to argue that their alliances with the United States are directly opposed to cherished national interests of the ROK and Japan. In the South Korean case, Russian diplomats claim that the United States is an obstacle to unification of the peninsula. For instance, Valery Denisov, a former Russian ambassador to the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), alleges that "the United States tried to prevent Pyongyang and Seoul from reconciling, repeatedly stopping former Presidents Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun from 'going too far' in their relations with North Korea."¹¹ Likewise, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov has stated that Japan's lack of independence from the United States is a major impediment to Tokyo's long-held desire for permanent membership of the United Nations Security Council.¹²

The most active use of this tactic has been in relation to the territorial dispute over the Russian-held Southern Kuril Islands, which are claimed by Japan as its Northern Territories. Moscow has been skillful in promoting the narrative that the United States is responsible for the continuation of the dispute, claiming that, when the Soviet Union and Japan were on the verge of an agreement to split the islands in 1956, U.S. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles threatened that, if Japan agreed to this territorial deal with the Soviets, the United States might never return Okinawa, which was then under U.S. administration.¹³ It is true that Dulles made this statement, but it was not the reason for the failure to reach a settlement and thereby sign a peace treaty. Instead, Japan rejected the deal in 1956 due to domestic political rivalry.¹⁴

Furthermore, while Putin claims that he would like to settle all outstanding issues with Japan,¹⁵ in reality, the Russian side benefits by keeping the territorial dispute alive. Moscow could easily refuse to discuss the issue, as Japan does with the Senkaku Islands, which are claimed by

Beijing. Instead, Russia willingly engages in talks. In doing so, Moscow gives itself a source of leverage since Russia can warn that, if Japan acts in any way that is unfavorable to Russia's interests, this will have an impact on the ongoing negotiations. For instance, when Japan confirmed its initial decision to purchase the Aegis Ashore missile defense system, Maria Zakharova, official spokeswoman of Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, warned that "Such actions by Tokyo ... will have a negative influence on the general atmosphere of bilateral relations, including negotiations on the peace treaty issue."¹⁶

Similarly, the Russian side has adroitly used the territorial issue to encourage the Japanese leadership to consider placing limits on the Security Treaty with the United States. Putin fanned Japanese hopes of a territorial deal by agreeing in November 2018 to advance talks on the basis of the 1956 Joint Declaration, which, in theory, promises to transfer two of the four disputed islands to Japan following the signing of a peace treaty.¹⁷ However, the Russian leader subsequently stated that any discussion of a territorial transfer could not be separated from questions about the U.S.-Japan alliance. In Putin's words, "Where is our guarantee that new American strike weapons will not appear on these islands tomorrow? It is necessary that this is a subject of our discussions."¹⁸ Even though it is obvious that this was a Russian tactic to stir up trouble between Japan and its U.S. ally, it achieved some success since Prime Minister Abe Shinzo readily assured Putin that he would not allow U.S. bases on the islands.¹⁹

Since all Japanese prime ministers express their determination to resolve the territorial dispute with Russia and since Moscow has no real intention of settling the issue, Russia will be able to continue to use the territorial problem in this way. This is a source of diplomatic leverage that Moscow lacks in its relations with Seoul.

INFORMATION TOOLS

In this context, information tools mean any form of Russian activity designed to influence the public narratives within Japan and South Korea. Russia has an interest in promoting a favorable image of itself, while encouraging negative opinions about the United States.

Some of these actions are undertaken openly and have much in common with other countries' public diplomacy. For instance, in recent years, the Russian government has used cultural programs to boost Russia's national

image. Within Japan, an annual festival of Russian culture has been held since 2006. 2018-19 was also the Year of Russia in Japan, and 2020-21 was to be the Year of Russia-Japan Inter-regional and Twin-city Exchange. Similarly, before the coronavirus pandemic intervened, 2020-21 was to be the Year of Mutual Cultural Exchange between Russia and South Korea, marking 30 years of diplomatic relations. To highlight the same anniversary, the authorities of Vladivostok proposed erecting a statue in the city to Yi Dong-hwi, a Korean independence fighter who led resistance efforts to Japanese colonial rule and died in exile in 1935.²⁰ Less subtle attempts to shape public opinion have come from SVR chief Sergei Naryshkin, who has sought to draw attention to the U.S. atomic bombings of Japan in 1945 by describing it in the Japanese media as “a crime against humanity.”²¹ During his previous role as speaker of the Russian parliament, Naryshkin also took the step of presenting Prime Minister Abe with Soviet newsreel footage of the attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.²²

Another tool at Russia’s disposal is state-controlled media in the local language. Moscow has Japanese-language versions of *Sputnik* and *Russia Beyond*. The former is a government-controlled agency that is part of *Rossiia Segodnya*, which also controls *RIA Novosti*. *Russia Beyond* was created in 2007 by *Rossiiskaya Gazeta*, the official newspaper of the Russian government.²³ There is no state-controlled Russian media in Korean, which suggests that Japan is a higher priority in Russia’s communication strategy.

Sputnik and its sibling *RT* (of which there is no Japanese version) have bad reputations in the West and have been accused of propagating falsehoods and sowing division.²⁴ By contrast, *Russia Beyond* is less contentious, since it primarily serves up cultural and lifestyle articles, as well as quirky stories designed to appeal on social media.

This is also the pattern with the outlets’ Japanese-language versions. *Russia Beyond* concentrates on harmless cultural stories. *Sputnik Japan*, by contrast, is more contentious. It lacks crude propaganda and, for the most part, looks like the website of a private news provider. Indeed, one of the topics most frequently covered is figure skating. However, the news coverage lacks balance. There is, of course, no criticism of Russian policies, whereas there are articles reinforcing the image that the U.S. alliance is the main obstacle to a Japan-Russia territorial agreement.²⁵ There are also several articles highlighting tensions connected with the U.S. military presence in Northeast Asia, including on

the topic of cost sharing and on the unpopular deployment of Osprey aircraft to Okinawa.²⁶ While such stories could be seen as instigating public opposition to the U.S. alliance, it is worth noting that similar articles regularly appear in the mainstream Japanese media, especially in the left-leaning *Asahi*. Overall, rather than to aggressively fan controversy, the priority of *Sputnik Japan* appears to be to build readership and develop credibility while subtly contributing to Moscow’s favored narrative.

Of course, the information domain also includes covert activities. This is the field of so-called “active measures.” According to Stanislav Levchenko, a KGB officer who served in Tokyo until his defection to the United States in 1979, “Active measures is a term used to identify operations designed to influence actions in other countries, to shape their political stances or decisions, and to lead their people to opinions that best serve Soviet aims.”²⁷ More specifically, active measures include techniques such as disinformation, counterfeiting, penetration of local political parties, sabotage, and assassination.

By their nature, these activities are not easy to report on. What information there is on Russian active measures in Northeast Asia is primarily historical and relates almost exclusively to Japan. One of the best sources is the aforementioned Levchenko. He explains that, during his time as an intelligence officer, the main objectives of Soviet active measures in Japan included to “provoke distrust between the United States and Japan in political, military, and economic arenas.”²⁸ To pursue this goal, many Soviet agents used diplomatic cover, but it was also common for them to pose as journalists. Levchenko estimates that around half of Soviet journalists stationed abroad were actually full-time intelligence officers.²⁹

Overall, Levchenko reports that Soviet intelligence achieved significant success within Japan. He put this down to the weakness of Japanese counterintelligence. Indeed, during his training at the KGB Foreign Intelligence School in the early 1970s, Levchenko was taught:

We can use Japan as a base from which we can get anything we need. A wealth of information of political, economic, and military value can be gained, and it does not have to be limited to Japan only. With Japan as the base, all other countries of the world are vulnerable to the Soviet Union—and that includes the United States and South Korea.³⁰

He goes on to explain:

The KGB penetrated most of the major newspapers in Japan. Among agents of influence were a former cabinet minister, a prominent Liberal Democrat, several high-ranking politicians from the Japanese Socialist Party, and important members of the academic, journalistic, and business communities.³¹

The cabinet minister was Ishida Hirohide, who was minister of labor (1976-77) and served as chair of the Parliamentary Japanese-Soviet Friendship Association.³² An even greater success was the recruitment (using a honey trap) of a cipher clerk in Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This agent, known as NAZAR, passed Japanese diplomatic telegrams to his Soviet handlers, including traffic between Japan's embassy in Washington and Tokyo.³³

Other prominent operations included encouraging an airport demonstration by communist students against the visit to Japan of U.S. President Dwight Eisenhower in 1960. With the Japanese government unable to guarantee the security of the president, the visit was cancelled, leading to Prime Minister Kishi Nobusuke's resignation. Soviet agents in Tokyo also published bogus security annexes to the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty, which purported to show that U.S. troops could still be used to suppress civil unrest within Japan.³⁴ Separately, during the Vietnam War, the KGB ran an operation that helped U.S. soldiers in Japan to desert, before smuggling them to the Soviet Union where they were used for propaganda purposes. To conceal Moscow's hand, the KGB used the Japanese anti-war group Beheiren as a front. Lastly, there were sabotage plans devised by the KGB which, thankfully, were not carried out. These included operation VULKAN, a planned bomb attack on the American Cultural Center in Tokyo in October 1965, which KGB agents intended to blame on Japanese nationalists. Another proposed "special action" was to scatter radioactive material in Tokyo Bay in 1969, with the anticipation that it would be blamed on U.S. nuclear submarines.³⁶

It is a matter of speculation as to what extent Russia continues any form of active measures against Japan (or South Korea). A few small points, however, can be made. One is that all journalists working for Russian publications in Japan are, once again, employees of state-controlled media. This does not mean that they are necessarily working for Russian intelligence, but it does mean that their professional priorities are those of the Russian state.

Second, in addition to maintaining the usual contacts with all the main Japanese political parties, Russia has close ties with Issuikai. This is a fringe nationalist group founded in 1972. It is inspired by Mishima Yukio, the nationalist author who attempted a military coup in November 1970 and committed ritual suicide after its failure. Issuikai aims to achieve Japan's "independence" from the United States and seeks the abolition of the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty.³⁷ In terms of the group's connections with Russia, Issuikai chairman Kimura Mitsuhiro has visited Crimea 10 times since 2014. He is also the subject of several articles on *Sputnik Japan*, in which he argues in favor of Moscow's annexation of Crimea and calls on the Japanese public to oppose international sanctions on Russia. Kimura also helped facilitate former Japanese prime minister Hatoyama Yukio's visit to Crimea in 2015.³⁸

Lastly, another apparent case of Russia seeking to sour Japanese public opinion against the United States is the interview given by Sergei Glaz'ev, a prominent Putin adviser, to the *Ryūkyū Shimpō*, Okinawa's main newspaper. In the October 2019 article, Glaz'ev presents U.S. bases in Okinawa as a major obstacle to better relations with Russia and urges Japan to distance itself from the United States.³⁹ Interestingly, Glaz'ev has previously written about hybrid warfare and about the potential of "cognitive techniques that turn the mass media into a highly effective psychotropic weapon of mass destruction."⁴⁰

Given the lack of publicly available information, it is difficult to say whether these are isolated incidents or just the tip of the iceberg. However, in the case of Japan and South Korea, there is no evidence that Russia is conducting a widespread political influence campaign, including the manipulation of social media and electoral interference, of the sort it has been accused in Europe and North America.

MILITARY TOOLS

In contrast to the information sphere, there is better data on Russia's military activities in Northeast Asia. These indicate that Russia employs military means to remind South Korea and Japan of its capacity to make life difficult for them and thereby deter them from actions of which Moscow disapproves.

The main tactic in this regard is to conduct regular sorties by military aviation, including strategic bombers. Japan's Ministry of Defence publishes detailed statistics on the number of scrambles by the Japanese Air Self-Defence

Force (JASDF) by approaching foreign aircraft. In FY 2018, JASDF fighters were scrambled 343 times in response to Russian aircraft.⁴¹ It is not uncommon for these sorties to also provoke scrambles by the ROK Air Force since the area of greatest activity is over the Sea of Japan/East Sea. Seoul reports that Russian aircraft trespassed within South Korea's Air Defense Identify Zone (KADIZ) on twenty occasions between January and October 2019.⁴² The vast majority of these flights do not violate Japanese or the ROK's national airspace, but there are exceptions, including in June 2019 when two Tu-95 long-range bombers made two successive incursions into Japanese airspace.⁴³ Russia also ratchets up and down its activity in response to neighbors' behavior. For instance, after Japan followed the United States in introducing sanctions on Russia in 2014, scrambles prompted by Russian aircraft jumped to 473, an increase of 114 from FY 2013.⁴⁴

From the perspective of U.S.-led alliance structures in Northeast Asia, the most interesting Russian military activity of recent years was the joint air patrol conducted with China over the Sea of Japan/East Sea on July 23, 2019. In the first exercise of its kind between Beijing and Moscow, two Russian Tu-95 bombers and two Chinese H-6 bombers entered South Korea's KADIZ without prior notification. This alone would have been a notable development. However, even more intriguing was that, immediately after this joint patrol, a Russian A-50 aircraft twice violated the airspace over the ROK-administered island of Dokdo, which is claimed by Japan as Takeshima. In response, ROK aircraft fired more than 300 warning shots and Seoul issued a protest to Moscow.

The intention of the incursion may partly have been to test the responsiveness of ROK air defenses, a practice known in Russia as "cracking the hedgehog."⁴⁵ However, the airspace violation over Dokdo/Takeshima may also have been intended to exacerbate tensions between Seoul and Tokyo, which were already simmering due to disagreements over historical issues.⁴⁶ If this was Moscow's intention, it worked perfectly, since Tokyo responded, not by criticizing Russia, but by condemning South Korea. Specifically, Foreign Minister Kono Taro stated: "Takeshima is Japan's territory ... It is Japan that should take action against the Russian plane that entered its airspace. It is incompatible with Japan's stance that South Korea takes steps on that."⁴⁷

This incident was therefore a vivid reminder of the opportunities that frictions in the ROK-Japan relationship provide to opponents of U.S.-led alliance structures. Given the ease with which Russia was able to exacerbate tensions between Seoul and Tokyo, it would be no surprise if Moscow were to try the same tactic again.

Furthermore, activity by its aircraft is not the only tool at the disposal of the Russian military. After the U.S. deployment of THAAD in South Korea in 2017, Russia and China announced the start of consultations on the development of joint missile defense.⁴⁸ With Washington considering deployments of intermediate-range missiles within East Asia, and with Japan as one potential location, more such retaliatory action by Moscow can be expected. In particular, the official think tank of Japan's Ministry of Defense has warned that, following the expiration of the INF Treaty in August 2019, Russia could deploy missiles in the Russian Far East, and even on the disputed Southern Kurils, thereby putting Japanese and Korean territory within range.⁴⁹

ECONOMIC TOOLS

The last of the four domains is the weakest for Moscow. While Russia has skilled diplomats, experienced spies, and a large military, it lacks economic heft. For instance, after the deployment of THAAD, China was able to punish ROK economically by cutting off tourism and boycotting South Korean firms. This cost South Korea \$7.6 billion in 2017 alone. Moreover, scholars speculate that, "such measures, if coordinated over time, could well force South Korea to 'choose' between economic security (tied to trade with China) and national security (tied to the military alliance with the United States)."⁵⁰ By contrast, since Russia's economy is roughly the same size as South Korea's and considerably smaller than Japan's, Moscow cannot exert similar economic pressure.

Energy might seem like one area for potential influence. South Korea and Japan are major hydrocarbon importers that wish to reduce their dependence on the Middle East. Theoretically, Moscow could use energy exports as a foreign-policy instrument, especially since ROK and Japan already import Russian oil and gas.

Yet, while Russia has applied this tactic to Ukraine and Belarus, it will not work with South Korea and Japan. First, the energy source that is best suited to exerting political pressure is pipeline gas. This is because, if supplies are curtailed, the consuming country often has no other import options, since alternative pipelines cannot quickly be built. However, neither South Korea nor Japan has a gas pipeline with Russia, and rely instead on more flexible imports of liquefied natural gas (LNG). Furthermore, the LNG market is currently oversupplied, including rising exports from the United States and Australia. This means that, rather than being able to use energy exports as a source of leverage, Russia is instead forced to compete for customers. This trend was already being driven by countries' decarbonization policies. It will accelerate due to the coronavirus pandemic, which has crushed global energy demand.

A second consideration is that ROK President Moon Jae-in and Abe have been proponents of closer economic ties with Russia. When visiting Vladivostok in September 2017, Moon announced the New Northern Policy and the 9-bridge strategy. Similarly, in May 2016, Abe announced a new approach to relations with Russia, featuring an 8-point economic cooperation plan.⁵²

In each case, the motivations are more political than economic. For Moon, the real purpose of the New Northern Policy is to promote diplomatic engagement with North Korea. By developing trilateral projects between the ROK, DPRK, and Russia, Moon hopes to encourage North Korea to open up. As for Abe, his intention is to use economic cooperation to lay the groundwork for a territorial deal. In theory then, Moscow could use Moon and Abe's eagerness for closer economic ties as a source of political leverage.

Once again, however, this makes more sense in theory than in practice. In reality, Russia's economic weakness, especially in the Russian Far East, is such that it cannot afford to be choosy about inbound foreign investment. What is more, while Seoul and Tokyo have sought to encourage economic cooperation with Russia, the private sectors have been less enthusiastic due to the perception that Russia remains a risky investment destination.⁵³ As a result, levels of economic investment in Russia are disappointing and ROK-Russia total bilateral trade in 2019 was only \$24.5 billion. The figure for Japan-Russia trade was \$20.3 billion.⁵⁴ By comparison, despite a bitter trade dispute, ROK-Japan trade in 2019

was in excess of \$76 billion.⁵⁵ Overall, while economic cooperation with Russia remains an important topic, it is not an area that can be used by Moscow to weaken U.S.-led alliance structures.

CONCLUSION

In answer to this paper's main question, Russia certainly is seeking to encourage South Korea and Japan to distance themselves from the United States, as well as from each other. Moscow's ultimate aim is for South Korea and Japan to abandon their alliances with the United States and embrace neutrality. In pursuit of this long-term agenda, Russia employs diplomatic, informational, and military tools, though it lacks leverage in the economic sphere. Another finding was that Russia is more active vis-à-vis Japan than ROK. It is possible that this is due to the shorter history of Russia-ROK relations, with Moscow having largely ignored South Korea until diplomatic ties were established in 1990.

A harder question is how effective Russia's actions have been. At present, there are certainly opportunities to exploit. These include the tensions caused by the Trump administration's tough line on sharing the costs of U.S. force deployments, as well as the poisonous atmosphere in ROK-Japan relations.

In this propitious environment, Russia has had some successes. The most notable is the July 2019 incursion into the airspace over Dokdo/Takeshima, which so easily ignited arguments between Seoul and Tokyo. Russian media also observed with satisfaction the downgrading of relations with Japan in the ROK's 2019 Diplomatic White Paper, with Japan now described as merely "one of Korea's closest neighboring countries." By contrast, the 2019 White Paper emphasizes the ROK's "strategic partnership" with Russia.⁵⁶ Another clear success has been Moscow's use of the Southern Kurils/Northern Territories issue to persuade the Abe government to distance Japan from the West's tougher stance on Russia since 2014. For instance, Japan was the only G7 member not to expel Russian diplomats following the poisoning of Sergei Skripal in Salisbury in March 2018. Russian media also claimed that Japan's decision to suspend the deployment of the Aegis Ashore system was the consequence of Tokyo's desire not to antagonize Moscow, though, in reality, other factors were probably more important.⁵⁷

These and the other examples above show that Moscow has achieved some short-term victories. However, this needs to be put in perspective. Of the Cold War period, it has been said that, "Though the KGB offensive in Japan generated many tactical operational successes, it ended in strategic failure."⁵⁸ This remains true today. Although strains are visible, the South Korean and Japanese alliances with the United States are a long way from collapse. What is more, despite the divisive foreign policy of President Trump, the United States remains popular, with 77% of South Koreans and 68% of Japanese expressing a favorable attitude.⁵⁹ By contrast, only 25% of Japanese and 42% of South Koreans express a favorable attitude towards Russia.⁶⁰

Of course, this is not to say that Seoul and Tokyo can ignore Russia's actions. Moscow has sought to undermine U.S. alliances for decades and it will continue to do so. What is more, as shown by the countries' first joint aviation patrol in July 2019, cooperation between Russia and China is becoming closer. This raises the concern that Moscow and Beijing may unite their efforts to drive a wedge between the United States and its East Asian allies, thereby combining China's economic weight with Russia's skills in influence operations. It is also worth noting that another four years of "America First" would provide Russia with plenty of further frictions to exploit. Overall, Seoul and Tokyo must remain watchful of Russian efforts to put a spoke in the wheel of U.S.-led alliance structures in Northeast Asia.

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