

RUSSIA-DPRK RELATIONS: LONG-TERM OR AD-HOC?

by

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Since the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, a pivotal event that has significantly influenced global politics, the world has witnessed a notable shift in the relationship between Kim Jong Un's North Korea and Vladimir Putin's Russia. The more on-and-off relationship has turned into a much more stable interaction. The year 2023 marked a turning point, with diplomatic visits and military cooperation between Russia and North Korea (DPRK) reaching unprecedented levels. The two have, seemingly, emerged as strategic trading partners, with North Korea seeking ways to bypass sanctions against its missile and nuclear program and Russia facing increased demands for weapons supply due to its prolonged invasion of Ukraine, and both have found a political partner in the UN and other international bodies.

The current warming of relations between Russia and North Korea is not a recent development. Russia's ability to purchase North Korean weaponry that is already compatible with its own weapons systems is a testament to a long history of technology and weapons exchanges between the two countries. This has laid the foundation for their current interactions, but difficulties and suspicion have always characterized the relationship. It is not only an issue of trust and partnership, but both states have a clear political and economic agenda, and it could be worth mentioning that North Korea may even be using Russia's military activities in Ukraine as an opportunity to test its products on an actual battlefield. However, as history has it, the relationship between the two has fluctuated without establishing long-term and lasting ties, and it is worth considering what is different this time, if anything.

This blog piece aims to briefly present an overview of

significant developments between Russia and North Korea, including international reactions to this. It will delve into the motivations and issues that shape Russia-DPRK relations and discuss whether the relationship has long-term prospects. By doing so, it seeks to offer a nuanced analysis of the future of this complex and evolving relationship.

Key Developments

The relationship between North Korea and Russia has shown notable improvements in a very short time. On [July 27, 2023](#), North Korea's leader Kim Jong Un met with a visiting Chinese ruling party official and Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu in Pyongyang. This meeting was North Korea's first with a foreign dignitary since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and was held to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the Korean Armistice Agreement. [North Korean state media](#) confirmed Shoigu and Kim had discussed "some issues arising in further developing the strategic and tactical collaboration and cooperation between the two countries in the field of defense and security." Speculations have it that Kim Jong Un also purportedly displayed the country's most advanced and potentially nuclear-capable missiles to his visitors in a military parade. Current affairs may point to this meeting as the budding start to the recent arms trades between North Korea and Russia, as Kim's bid to boast of the country's military capabilities to Shoigu may have laid the groundwork for the high-level meeting later held between the two countries' leaders.

On [September 12, 2023](#), in a meeting that rattled the international stage, Kim Jong Un met Russian President Vladimir Putin at the Vostochnyy Cosmodrome in Amur. Amidst discussions, Kim pledged his support for Russia's military endeavors in Ukraine, which sparked speculations about North Korea's supply of weaponry to Russia to be used in Ukraine. Concurrently, talks extended to potential Russian assistance in critical areas such as energy, food supplies, and North Korea's satellite program, of which there had been a prior unsuccessful attempt to launch. This agreement has been cited multiple times as the main reason why North Korea was able to launch its first "spy" satellite into orbit on

[November 21, 2023](#), after three failed attempts – an achievement many believe was reached with the help of Russia’s technical support, even if it is unlikely that Russian technology was incorporated so quickly. The September summit between Kim and Putin has been seen as underscoring the strategic alignment between the two nations, and it hinted at a burgeoning partnership from the point at which North Korea started supplying weaponry to Russia and Russia supporting North Korea with its missile and nuclear programs.

Further solidifying the evolving ties, on [October 18, 2024](#), Russia’s Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov embarked on a visit to North Korea, marking his first since 2018. Lavrov’s discussions with Kim Jong Un and North Korea’s Foreign Minister Choe Son Hui emphasized mutual support and solidarity, reiterating once again North Korea’s support for Russia’s actions in the Ukraine war. Lavrov’s statements echoed Moscow’s appreciation for North Korea’s unwavering backing while hinting at reciprocal aid and cooperation. Lavrov’s visit was seen as setting the stage for a potential visit of Putin to North Korea. Although Putin reportedly accepted [Kim’s invitation](#) for a visit to North Korea at the September summit, Putin has yet to do so. To reinforce the possibility of such a meeting, the Russian foreign intelligence chief visited North Korea in [late March](#). However, there are speculations that the delayed opening of Western embassies in North Korea is connected to this meeting.

This trajectory of enhanced engagement culminated in a summit on [January 16, 2024](#), hosted in Moscow by President Vladimir Putin and Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov. North Korea’s Foreign Minister Choe Son Hui engaged in talks to expand bilateral ties and implement agreements forged between Putin and Kim at the September summit. Once more, expressions of gratitude were exchanged for North Korea’s support regarding Russia’s actions in Ukraine, highlighting the depth of their strategic alignment. In the latest development, on [March 29, 2024](#), Russia vetoed the United Nations’ renewal of the Panel of Experts tasked with monitoring North Korea’s compliance with international sanctions. This decision followed

the panel’s recent update earlier in March, where it announced an investigation into reports of arms transfers. The veto has drawn criticism from South Korea, the U.S., and Ukraine, who argue that intensified scrutiny of North Korea could reveal the truth behind the suspicions of arms transfers involving Russia. Experts contend that this veto underscores, once again, the ineffectiveness of the UN Security Council in addressing North Korea, with certain permanent members unwilling to fulfill their obligations. Russia instead argued that the sanctions were becoming irrelevant and unrealistic in preventing North Korea’s nuclear weapon proliferation.

Reactions to Russia-DPRK Partnership

The alignment between Russia and North Korea has encountered opposition from various quarters globally. South Korea’s current representative to the UN, Ambassador Hwang, has consistently condemned Russia’s utilization of North Korean weaponry in Ukraine and the high-level engagements between the two nations at multiple sessions of the UN Security Council. Preceding the UNSC meeting on [January 23, 2024](#), delegates from 46 countries and the European Union held a press briefing denouncing North Korean military support for Russia’s war in Ukraine, among others. Concerns were expressed regarding Russia’s provision of “valuable insights into the technical capabilities” of North Korean weapons by employing them in the war in Ukraine.

China, a key ally of Russia and North Korea, has so far [maintained a low profile](#) regarding the deepening cooperation between the two countries, consistently stating that such collaborations are bilateral matters in which China will not intervene. According to a statement by [Liu Pengyu](#), spokesperson for the Chinese Embassy in Washington, China does not appear to acknowledge the military cooperation between Russia and North Korea, stating he “has nothing to share” on the matter. China’s influence in Russia and North Korea is declining due to this strengthened partnership and it is a growing concern in Beijing.

While China remains a significant presence in the backdrop of this evolving alignment, it has not significantly affected its ties with other stakeholders

such as South Korea and the U.S., as U.S. National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan held discussions with Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi on [January 27, 2024](#). According to the meeting's White House background press call, given China's influence on North Korea, the two sides deliberated on issues pertaining to North Korea, saying that the U.S. is "deeply concerned about the growing relationship between Russia and the DPRK."

What is Behind the Curtains?

When Russia invaded Ukraine, it not only affected Ukraine and Russia, but the war also initiated a series of ripple effects – some obvious and expected, and some more unexpected. One such unexpected ripple is what we are now witnessing: A closer political, military, and economic alignment between Russia and North Korea. Historically, relations between Russia and North Korea have seen several shifts from Russia being one of the DPRK's most important partners and a key contributor of military and economic assistance to a partnership characterized by distrust and, to some extent, neglect. China has been North Korea's primary partner, and Russia has had little to offer to North Korea and vice versa. The prior Russian unwillingness to provide the latest military technology to Pyongyang has been well noted. How much of this has now changed?

Are we now watching a short-lived "partnership of convenience and necessity" or maybe the beginning of a longer-term and more comprehensive partnership? Undoubtedly, because of the fatal miscalculations from Moscow of a short "special military operations" morphing into a war of attrition, the war in Ukraine has triggered a series of re-calculations and policy changes in Russia. One such related to an acute need for Russia to replenish military equipment, stocks of ammunition, missiles, spare parts, etc. With Russia under severe sanctions – and many nations being reluctant to offer assistance, including China, with few nations having large stocks of interoperable military equipment to spare – the options for Russia were very limited. North Korea was maybe the only nation able to offer Russia the assistance it needed and offer it quickly. Having a struggling domestic economy, especially after years of pandemic closure,

North Korea suddenly found itself in a favorable position; a compatible major power suddenly required its support.

It is known that North Korea has supplied Russia with large quantities of military equipment, like ammunition and missiles. According to the ROK defense chief at a press conference with foreign journalists on March 18, 2024, "[around 300 containers have been additionally transported to Russia, amounting to around 7,000 now.](#)" For North Korea, the supply of weapons to Russia carries both advantages and risks. The advantage is obviously receiving some form of compensation from Moscow, be it financial, technological, or military, but it also gives the Korean People's Army (KPA) an opportunity to test its weapons on the battlefield against Western military technology to improve those weapons systems further. The risks are evident: Reduction in its national stocks, the challenge to produce new weapons to replenish national stocks, and a risk that the weapons supplied to Russia are not meeting combat expectations and requirements.

In addition, it is also known that several senior-level meetings, including one meeting between Putin and Kim, have taken place, but we know less about what North Korea has received in return. Maybe more importantly, we do not know if it was Russia and President Putin that approached North Korea for assistance or if it was Kim Jung Un, realizing an opportunity in offering assistance. For a person of President Putin's personality, the leader of the great Russia with the largest arsenal of nuclear weapons in the world, reaching out to one of the poorest countries in the world and asking for support comes with a cost. It comes at a psychological and political cost for President Putin personally, and if the assumption is correct, it gives North Korea more leverage on Russia than just the immediate supply of weapons.

On the political side, Russia has already acted to terminate the UN Panel of Experts mandate, clearly something in the interest of Pyongyang, and it is reasonable to assume more such coordinated policies in international diplomacy. Other areas of Russian

support include – or may include – Russian help with North Korea’s satellite program, evasion of financial sanctions, including the release of North Korea’s frozen assets, direct petroleum transfers of petroleum products at Russian ports or at sea, continued military technology assistance, and help to North Korea to evade international sanctions. Russia’s effort to block a UN Security Council resolution against North Korea in the event of North Korea’s seventh nuclear test, a possibility hinted at by the Russian Ambassador to the United Nations in a [CNN news article from March 29](#), would be particularly severe. Due to this more comprehensive partnership, North Korea may be prepared to conduct bold actions and provocations. However, on the positive side, due to the mere fact that the DPRK has supplied Russia with significant stocks of military equipment, it is unlikely that Pyongyang would risk actions that could trigger a severe military confrontation on the Peninsula.

With his newfound partner in Moscow, Kim Jung Un is not in a hurry to agree on terms for dialogue with the U.S. or any international actor that would be unfavorable for North Korea, but rather to use the situation to improve its overall state of affairs. Pushing the boundaries of “acceptable behavior or normality” like Chinese action in and around Taiwan, will likely be more frequent. More activity closer to the Northern Limit Line (NLL), more military activity in the DMZ, and more missile tests and tests of new types of weapons are some examples of North Korean activities that can be expected. Such development will result in increased risks of both unintended incidents and military escalation and makes the arguments for risk reduction and risk management on the Korean Peninsula even more urgent.

One common interest for Russia and the DPRK, apart from the obvious military-to military partnership, is to reduce dependency on China. For decades, China has been the most important international partner for North Korea, especially in economic and political aspects. For Russia, the balance has shifted from being the “big brother” to China to now being the “little brother.” Both Russia and the DPRK may find their new partnership reducing some of China’s leverage on both nations. North

Korea has a history of being able to “pivot” between Beijing and Moscow for support, and it is in Beijing’s interest to limit Russia’s influence in Pyongyang. The recent development of a more coordinated three-way relationship (Beijing-Moscow-Pyongyang) not only offsets the U.S. allies’ efforts in the region but also allows China to maintain its dominating position. Foreign Minister Lavrov’s visit to Beijing on [April 8-9](#), where he held talks with his Chinese counterpart Mr. Wang and where he also met President Xi Jinping, and the visit to Pyongyang that began on [April 11 by Mr Zhao Leji](#), the highest Chinese official to visit Pyongyang since President Xi’s visit in 2019, signals a Chinese interest to maintain its “leadership role” in the trilateral relationship. An increase in DPRK-Russian military relations, including the transfer of more sophisticated technology, is likely not in China’s interest. Such a development would trigger an increase in U.S. military support and presence in the region.

Notwithstanding the above arguments, the Russia-DPRK partnership seems destined for much stronger cooperation, with an almost alliance-like structure in development. However, what strikes the eye is not necessarily reality. North Korea will have, if not already so, difficulty providing the same amount of military equipment over time due to its security situation and limited production capacity, especially considering the international sanctions that have crippled its production base. Russia, on its part, has dramatically improved its wartime production capacity. The acute lack of military equipment will not be as significant in a few months due to domestic production, and the quality of the North Korean weapons has been less than what Russia can provide itself. The question then arises: What is really keeping bilateral relations progressing in a positive way? Clearly, the partnership goes deeper than just weapons sales, but there is arguably no real depth, and Russia and North Korea depend on trade with other actors, i.e., China and the EU. Politically, they could reinforce each other – Russia more than North Korea – but there are limitations to what North Korea can offer Russia as China looms large behind the curtains.

North Korea has indicated an interest in developing more relations with the outside world, not least through its engagement with Japan and European institutions. The usage of Russia to balance China could also transfer to other states. North Korea has a tradition of balancing powers, and this case is a little different; national independence and political sustainability are the most important for both actors, and an exclusive relationship that would alienate them further from the outside world is not in the long-term interest of either Moscow or Pyongyang.

Conclusion and Summary

There seems to be some substance in the improved Russia-DPRK relations that goes beyond mere transactional engagement. But there is no real depth in the relations; to some extent, they are pushed towards each other by external factors. Not disregarding the potential of the engagement and the short-term concerns, it is unlikely to see an alliance in the making, or even a stronger economic, trade and technology cooperation.

The pariah status that both North Korea and Russia have emerged with are a problem for both, and in some ways, this partnership reinforces that branding. It is evident in both Moscow and Pyongyang that this is a concern, and both would like to expand into cooperation with more “normal” states. With this in mind, and with the declining trade with other nations,

the relationship will continue developing, but maybe not as quickly as seen in recent days. There are no apparent linkages between the two states, apart from the more opportunistic and transactional relations seen today. But even a slower and limited increase in cooperation will be problematic for South Korea and the U.S. as bolder actions by the DPRK translate into higher risks of military incidents and increased difficulties in achieving the stated objective of de-nuclearization.

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