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Triangular Tensions and Tactical Cooperation: PRC–DPRK–Russia

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The China–DPRK–Russia relationship between 2020 and 2025 reflects a series of strategic interactions marked by intensified bilateral cooperation alongside enduring tensions and competitive dynamics. Rather than constituting a cohesive anti-Western alliance, the three states operate through overlapping bilateral ties driven by short-term tactical interests and deeper integration is constrained by structural limits. Chinese and DPRK support for Russia following its invasion of Ukraine—despite Beijing's official claims of neutrality—has raised concerns about the extent and durability of cooperation among these authoritarian actors and their potential for coordinated action against the European Union and the broader West. While the relationship exceeds a mere marriage of convenience, it should not be mistaken for a values-based trilateral alliance. Instead, it is largely reactive and oppositional in orientation. This paper analyzes the strengths and weaknesses of these intersecting relationships and assesses their implications for Western diplomacy, highlighting opportunities to exploit internal frictions while managing coordinated challenges to the U.S.-led international order.

The Chinese and Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) support for the Russian invasion of Ukraine, regardless of China's official claim of neutrality, has created concerns about the depth of the cooperation among these three authoritarian states, and what can be expected in terms of alliances and common actions against the European Union (EU) and the "West". This paper attempts to outline the strengths and weaknesses of these relationships, noting that they represent not one but multiple overlapping relations.

The People's Republic of China (PRC)–DPRK–Russia trilateral relationship from 2020 to 2025 reveals a complex web of strategic partnerships characterized by significant bilateral cooperation alongside persistent tensions and competitive dynamics. Rather than forming a cohesive anti-Western alliance, these three nations operate through overlapping bilateral relationships that serve immediate tactical needs while maintaining structural limitations on deeper integration. While being more than a marriage of convenience, this relationship should not be confused with a trilateral alliance or a partnership guided by common values; it is directed against the "West" rather than for something.

The most significant development has been Russia's dramatic pivot toward the DPRK following the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. This has fundamentally altered regional dynamics, sidelining the PRC's traditional dominant influence over Pyongyang, something that has aroused serious concerns in Beijing.[1] This shift represents the most substantial reconfiguration of Northeast Asian geopolitics since the Cold War, further cemented by the signing of a comprehensive strategic partnership between Russia and the DPRK in June 2024 that includes mutual defense commitments. However, beneath this surface cooperation lie deep structural tensions rooted in competing national interests, historical grievances, and fundamental disagreements over strategic priorities.

The relationship operates through three distinct bilateral partnerships rather than a unified trilateral axis, with each country willing, at times, to exclude or sideline the others when immediate interests diverge, but always keeping national interests at the forefront. This dynamic creates both opportunities and challenges for Western diplomacy to exploit divisions while containing their coordinated opposition to the U.S.-led international order, i.e. the West.

Russia and DPRK Forge an Unprecedented Military Partnership

As noted, the most dramatic shift in trilateral dynamics has been the deepening of Russia–DPRK military cooperation, which has fundamentally altered regional power balances and created new concerns, not only among democracies, but also in China. Putin's June 18-19, 2024 visit to Pyongyang, his first since 2000, resulted in the most significant bilateral agreement since the Cold War.[2] The Treaty on Comprehensive Strategic Partnership includes a mutual defense clause requiring "immediate military assistance" if either country enters a state of war, effectively reviving the defunct Soviet-era military alliance. The DPRK has chosen to interpret this as obligating it to send troops and military support to Russia in its war in Ukraine in the autumn of 2024. More importantly, it has enabled the DPRK to gain substantial battlefield experience, technological transfers, and broader military expertise that enhance the DPRK's strategic autonomy vis-à-vis China, the U.S., and international sanctions.

This partnership has produced tangible military cooperation on an unprecedented scale. The DPRK has initially deployed over 10,000 troops, with some estimates reaching 30,000, to support Russian operations in Ukraine's Kursk region.[3] This comes alongside the provision of at least 10,000 and up to 20,000 containers of military equipment and approximately 5 million artillery rounds, valued at over $20 billion, according to a joint study by Reuters and the Open Source Center.[4] In exchange, Russia has supplied air defense missiles, electronic warfare equipment, and critically advanced space technology and financial resources that enabled the DPRK's successful satellite launches and the technical refinement of its military forces. It has become increasingly clear that this cooperation extends beyond immediate war needs, contributing to long-term strategic capabilities, with suspected Russian assistance in the DPRK's development of solid-fuel intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) and cruise missile systems.

However, this partnership has come at the cost of China's traditional influence over the DPRK, especially as the arms trade has markedly shifted into Russian hands. Chinese officials were not consulted in advance of Putin's Pyongyang visit, according to private sources, marking a significant diplomatic slight. The timing was particularly pointed, as Chinese officials were simultaneously engaged in the China–Japan–South Korea 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue in Seoul, suggesting deliberate diplomatic distancing and signaling. China offered a restrained official response when Foreign Ministry spokesperson Lin Jian provided only measured support for Russia's "traditional friendly relations with relevant countries," revealing China's discomfort with being excluded from major regional strategic decisions.

That said, China's economic and military (direct and dual-use) support to Russia remains the most

effective and sustainable lifeline for Moscow, and Beijing is unlikely to drop its support for Putin's war against Ukraine, just as Russia is increasingly dependent on Chinese backing, as we will see.

A Strategic Alliance Between Russia and China in All but Name?

Sino-Russian military cooperation has expanded substantially since 2020, with 2024 marking a significant expansion in their relations. This has been driven by shared security concerns and mutual defense needs, but the bilateral relationship remains constrained by limitations that prevent the formation of a formal alliance structure. The first constraint concerns what China and Russia are seeking to accomplish. China is not ready to overthrow the international system but rather seeks to dominate and reshape it to fit Beijing's interests, while Russia is more openly destructive and seeks to disrupt and destroy the international system. Beijing is increasingly wary of this disruptive Russian behavior, which threatens the development of China and risks putting Beijing in a situation in which it must engage in military actions against trade partners. Despite its nationalistic and anti-western behavior, the PRC is not interested in disruptive behavior, with the exception of Taiwan and what it defines as internal affairs.

The increased military cooperation began with Chinese participation in Russian strategic exercises, such as Vostok 2022, with over 2,000 Chinese personnel, 300 vehicles, 21 aircraft, and 3 warships participating.[5] Northern/Interaction-2023 included Chinese destroyers, frigates, and 15 aircraft operating from Russian bases for the first time.[6] This marked China's largest participation in Russian military exercises and demonstrated growing operational integration. The 2023 record was surpassed in 2024, when11 joint military exercises were conducted—more than any other year.[7]

Naval cooperation has extended beyond bilateral exercises to include Iran in the annual Maritime Security Belt series. The March 2025 Security Belt exercise in the Gulf of Oman represented the seventh annual trilateral naval exercise involving China, Russia, and Iran,[8] with over 15 ships participating in anti-piracy and joint combat operations. However, the DPRK remains notably absent from these exercises, participating only as an observer in Russia's OKEAN-24 naval exercise in September 2024. DPRK has been invited to participate in bilateral and multilateral exercises with China and Russia but has not yet actively participated in joint exercises.

Technology transfer from China to Russia has accelerated dramatically, particularly in support of Russia's war effort. China supplies approximately 90 percent of Russia's critical defense industrial components, while Russia provides advanced military technology and battlefield experience to China.[9] Currently, about 70 percent of Russia's machine tools and 90 percent of legacy semiconductors, with monthly exports exceeding $300 million in dual-use "high priority" items, are indicated to be of Chinese origin.[10] This includes optical components, UAV engines, and turbojet engines for cruise missiles, representing the most extensive military-related technology transfer between the countries since the 1950s. It is beyond doubt that Russia would not be able to sustain its invasion of Ukraine without direct Chinese support.

However, significant limitations constrain deeper military integration. China officially refuses to provide lethal weapons to Russia for the Ukraine conflict, maintaining "measured participation" that avoids formal military commitments, a hollow argument when considering the extensive technological support. This reflects China's ambition to maintain economic relations with Western countries while supporting a militarily strong Russia, and Beijing knows full well that Chinese support keeps the Russian war machine operational.

Another reason for China to maintain support for Russia is that the DPRK provides extensive military support to Russia, and this bilateral cooperation largely excludes China from planning and coordination, a dynamic that has raised concerns in Beijing. The political

leadership in Beijing is walking a tightrope, with Europe, Russia, and the DPRK closely watching.

A Weaker Link? Sino–DPRK Military Cooperation

China and the DPRK maintain the 1961 Sino-DPRK Mutual Aid and Cooperation Friendship Treaty, whereby China pledged to immediately render military and other assistance "by all means" to its ally against any outside attack. This agreement was renewed in 1981, 2001, and 2021, indicating a political will to ensure the DPRK's political and military independence. As of at least 2025, the DPRK is the only country with which China has a formal alliance. This mutual defense treaty remains the cornerstone of their military relationship, making the DPRK China's sole formal military ally globally.

However, the relationship has become increasingly strained due to several factors. Russia's growing influence is one of the core factors. The DPRK has been seeking to reduce its overwhelming dependency on China and has been successful. Its rapprochement with Russia, an energy supplier and provider of technological support for military programs that China has been reluctant to offer itself, reflects its desire to diversify its partnerships and escape Chinese pressure or influence, at least partially.[11] When Russia and the DPRK signed their comprehensive strategic partnership treaty in June 2024, China merely issued a terse statement: "China welcomes the traditional relations between Russia and the countries concerned" and "hopes for a political solution to the war in Ukraine," while refraining from commenting on the bilateral arrangements between its neighbors.[12] Of note, the language was more assertive than usual, and concerns remain about how this will impact not only China's influence in these two states but also the stability of the wider region.

China cannot ignore the potential regional consequences of deepening Russia–DPRK cooperation: an arms race, a potential hardening of the U.S.–South Korea alliance and diminishing Chinese influence in what it views as a critical buffer zone on the peninsula are major concerns. It should be noted that China has historically had a stabilizing effect on the DPRK and even Russia, despite its aggressive behavior. The growing Russia–DPRK military partnership threatens China's traditional role as the DPRK's primary patron and could destabilize the regional balance China seeks to maintain. The emergence of closer Russia–DPRK military cooperation has created what analysts describe as a potential trilateral axis. Some have even argued that the biggest factor reshaping the Northeast Asian security environment is the growing security and military partnership among Russia, China, and the DPRK.[13]

However, it can be argued that this "axis" faces significant obstacles, as the DPRK is China's sole military "ally" and, as PRC historian Shen Zhihua has cautioned, since the normalization of ties between Beijing and Seoul, the PRC–DPRK alliance was really just a "scrap of paper."[14] The current state of Sino–DPRK military cooperation reveals a relationship in transition. Chinese military support for the DPRK could arguably be more political than military. While the formal alliance structure remains intact, China's influence over the DPRK is diminishing as Pyongyang has diversified its partnerships, particularly with Russia. As Pyongyang opens up to other partnerships, it will increasingly behave as a more normal state rather than one heavily dependent on China, as it has been for a very long time.

This shift poses strategic challenges for China's regional stability objectives and complicates broader security dynamics in Northeast Asia. Military cooperation between China and the DPRK will undoubtedly continue, but it is increasingly constrained by the DPRK's pivot toward Russia and China's reluctance to fully support actions that could destabilize the region or damage its broader international relationships.

Economic Cooperation Masked by Significant Structural Disputes

While China and Russia publicly promote a

"no-limits" strategic partnership, a deeper examination reveals persistent tensions, failed joint ventures, and asymmetries that challenge the narrative of seamless cooperation. These frictions are especially evident in the Russian Far East and joint technological initiatives, despite record-breaking trade figures. China–Russia trade reached an all-time high of $244.8 billion in 2024, up from $240.1 billion in 2023—a modest 1.9 percent increase. However, the first four months of 2025 resulted in a 7.5 percent decline in trade compared to the same period in 2024, signaling potential saturation or geopolitical headwinds.[15] Despite these relatively stable figures, the trade relationship remains highly asymmetric—Russia depends on Chinese goods and capital far more than China depends on Russian exports.

China has shown interest in Russia's Far East, a region rich in resources and strategically located. Yet, actual investment has lagged political promises. As of 2025, 63 Chinese projects are active in the region, valued in the billions, but many are concentrated in energy and logistics, with limited diversification potential.[16] Russia has already invested approximately 5 trillion rubles and has set a target of 12 trillion rubles (approx. $154 billion) by 2030 in the Far East, including infrastructure upgrades,[17] but Chinese firms remain cautious, citing regulatory risks and the lack of institutional guarantees. The Mutual Investment Protection Agreement (MIPA), signed in 2025, aims to mitigate these risks,[18] but it should be viewed as a defensive mechanism rather than a sign of deep trust.

The most glaring example of failed cooperation is the CR929 wide-body aircraft project, once a flagship Sino–Russian venture. Originally launched as a joint project between COMAC (China) and UAC (Russia), the CR929 has now become a solo Chinese effort, with Russia quietly exiting due to disputes over intellectual property and sanctions-related supply chain issues.[19] Russia now plays a limited supplier role, contributing engines and composite wings, but no longer shares design or production control.[20] Additionally, in the digital economy, Chinese tech giants have withdrawn from Russian ventures, fearing secondary U.S. sanctions. This includes canceled cloud computing and AI collaborations that would have been critical for the Russian military economy and for international access to capital.[21]

It has been increasingly apparent that, despite institutional frameworks like MIPA and growing trade, strategic mistrust persists. As a result, China avoids deep integration in sectors like aerospace, biotech, and advanced manufacturing. Russia, while dependent on Chinese dual-use goods, as we have seen earlier, remains wary of becoming a junior partner in a relationship increasingly shaped by Beijing's terms. The lack of Chinese investment in Russian free zones and limited joint R&D reflects a broader reluctance to share sensitive technologies or commit long-term capital. It is reasonable to claim that the China–Russia economic relationship is robust in numbers but fragile in substance. Trade continues to grow, driven by necessity and sanctions-induced realignment. Yet, failed joint ventures, cautious investment behavior, and strategic asymmetries reveal a partnership driven more by geopolitical expediency than genuine economic integration.

Focusing on the numbers, the China–Russia Strategic Partnership in the energy and mineral sectors has often been highlighted as a success in bilateral relations. It is evident that China has significantly expanded its trade and resource extraction influence through strategic partnerships with an increasingly isolated Russia, particularly in Arctic energy and critical mineral projects. The Arctic LNG (Liquefied Natural Gas) 2 project exemplifies this deepening partnership. As Russia's second-largest gas initiative on the Gydan Peninsula, the project became a focal point for Sino–Russian energy cooperation despite mounting international pressure.[22] Between 2022 and 2023, Novatek, Russia's primary LNG producer, successfully secured gas turbines and related technology from Chinese suppliers to advance the project. However, the partnership faced significant challenges when the project was sanctioned in November 2023

by the U.S. Initially, major Chinese state-owned enterprises CNPC and CNOOC withdrew their participation,[23] followed by Wison New Energies on June 21, 2024.[24] Despite these withdrawals, China's commitment to the project has persisted through alternative channels. In August 2024, a fleet of Chinese cargo ships delivered critical power generation equipment for modules 1–3 to the Arctic site, deliberately circumventing international sanctions.[25] This sanctions evasion continued despite sustained U.S. diplomatic pressure to halt the cooperation. Chinese equipment deliveries persisted until January 2025, when comprehensive sanctions enacted during the final days of the Biden administration effectively suspended further shipments.[26]

Beyond energy, China has positioned itself as a key partner in Russia's critical mineral extraction efforts. MCC International Incorporation established a partnership with Polar Lithium, a Russian joint venture between state-owned Rosatom and Nornickel, the world's largest nickel producer. This collaboration targets the development of the Kolmozerskoye lithium deposit on the strategically important Kola Peninsula. The partnership extends to maritime logistics as well. In June 2024, Rosatom signed an agreement with Hainan Yangpu NewNew Shipping Co. Ltd to facilitate goods shipments from the Port of Arkhangelsk to China.[27] This was followed by a more ambitious joint venture between Rosatom and NewNew aimed at operating container vessels year-round on the Northern Sea Route (NSR), potentially transforming Arctic shipping dynamics and further integrating Chinese and Russian commercial interests in the region.

Economic tensions extend to pricing disputes over major energy projects. Negotiations over Russia's proposed Power of Siberia 2 pipeline have stalled due to fundamental disagreements over gas pricing, with China seeking prices near Russia's domestic rate (about $60 per1000m³) while Russia's existing exports to China command around $257 per 1000m³.[28] These disputes reflect deeper structural issues, with Russia increasingly feeling like a "junior partner" relegated to supplying commodities rather than high-value manufactured goods. Nonetheless, China is very likely to be able to push through some of its demands and eventually reopen selected investments.

Despite these failures, significant cooperation continues in other areas. The Yamal LNG project represents successful energy cooperation, with Chinese companies holding a combined 30 percent stake in the $27 billion project that produces 16.5 million tons annually, or according to China's CNPC, China holds 63 percent of a $19 billion investment.[29] It is notable how the Northern Sea Route has become a crucial component of China–Russia Arctic cooperation, with 21.86 million tons of LNG transported in 2024, representing 57.69 percent of total Arctic cargo. It is now an important connection for China and a lifeline for Russia.

The DPRK's integration into regional economic networks has accelerated through sanctions circumvention. China officially accounted for 97 percent of the DPRK's estimated foreign trade in 2022, but sophisticated smuggling networks have emerged to bypass UN restrictions further.[30] The U.S. Treasury identified 555 incidents of ships carrying prohibited goods from the DPRK to China in 2020, predominantly coal exports using "spoofing" techniques and ship-to-ship transfers. Chinese trade of $2.2 billion in 2024 is overshadowed by Russia's trade with the DPRK, primarily related to weapons transfers and payments for soldiers fighting for Russia, a development that has altered economic interaction in the region. It is unclear what China will do, but it seems likely that China will have to increase economic interaction with the DPRK, both in commercial and military goods, to maintain its influence and relevance. The construction of a new road bridge across the Tumen River, launched in April 2025, represents the first road link between Russia and the DPRK[31] and signals Moscow's commitment to expanding economic ties despite international sanctions, raising more than one concerned eyebrow in Beijing.

Territorial Disputes Reveal Persistent Historical Grievances

Territorial and border issues expose some of the deepest structural tensions in the trilateral relationship, rooted in historical grievances that current cooperation cannot fully overcome. China's publication of a new "standard map" in August 2023 claiming full sovereignty over Bolshoy Ussuriysky Island violated the 2004 bilateral agreement that had settled most China-Russia border disputes.[32] The map also used historical Chinese names for Russian cities, referring to Vladivostok as "Haishenwai" and Khabarovsk as "Boli," directly challenging Russian territorial sovereignty. This territorial assertion reflects deeper Chinese grievances over what it considers "unequal treaties," through which Russia annexed 1.4 million square kilometers of Chinese territory in the 1858 Treaty of Aigun and the 1860 Convention of Peking. While Russian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova rejected Chinese claims, Moscow's restrained response suggests awareness of the vulnerability created by its current dependence on Chinese economic and military support.

Maritime boundaries create additional complications. The DPRK has maintained a unilateral 200-nautical-mile economic and fishing exclusion zone in the Yellow Sea since July 1977, which China disputes.[33] This affects not only bilateral relations but also involves South Korea and Japan, creating complex multilateral tensions that China has been able to raise with South Korea and Japan, but that the DPRK has not. Chinese fishing vessels operating in DPRK waters have increased, with a daily average of 190 vessels in September and October in 2025, compared to a daily average of 30-40 vessels in 2024,[34] often without required permits, creating resource depletion that affects regional stability. Moreover, the PRC-DPRK border has undergone dramatic militarization since 2020. Satellite analysis revealed that the DPRK constructed almost 500 kilometers of new border fencing between 2020 and 2023, with a 20-fold increase in security facilities placed every 110 meters on average.[35] This fortification represents the most significant border infrastructure development since the Korean War and reflects Pyongyang's growing emphasis on controlling rather than facilitating cross-border movement. This is primarily directed toward the DPRK's own challenges with increased defections, and it has made it measurably more difficult to illegally transit the border, but it will also decrease the bilateral contacts that flourished through illegal trade.

Diplomatic Coordination Constrained by Competing Priorities

Diplomatic cooperation between the three countries reveals both shared anti-Western objectives and fundamental limitations in their ability to coordinate effectively. The most significant diplomatic tension emerged during UN Security Council voting on March 28, 2024, when Russia vetoed the extension of the UN Panel of Experts monitoring DPRK sanctions while China abstained.[36] This marked the first time Russia used its veto power specifically to end DPRK sanctions monitoring, but China's abstention revealed its unwillingness to fully support the move.

These voting patterns reflect broader strategic differences. While all three countries share opposition to U.S. hegemony, their approaches differ significantly. China seeks a gradual erosion of Western influence while maintaining economic integration with developed economies. Russia, increasingly isolated by sanctions, pursues more confrontational and disruptive approaches. The DPRK prioritizes regime survival and strategic autonomy over broader geopolitical objectives, although concerns over a possible adaptation of Russia's more disruptive strategies should be noted.

The 2024 "Year of Friendship" between China and the DPRK, marking the 75th anniversary of diplomatic ties, demonstrated the deterioration in their relationship.[37] Despite the official designation as a commemoration year, the Chinese delegation was led by a Vice Chairman

of the National People's Congress rather than higher-level officials, and notably, Xi Jinping did not send a personal message to Kim Jong Un—a significant diplomatic snub that would have been unthinkable during earlier periods of close cooperation.

Successful coordination does occur in specific contexts. All three countries participated in the May 9, 2025, Moscow Victory Day Parade, with Chinese and DPRK troops marching alongside Russian forces in a symbolic display of trilateral coordination against Western influence. This represents one of the few instances of genuine trilateral cooperation rather than bilateral partnerships, something that was repeated in the very cordial relations between the leaders in Beijing in September 2025.[38]

Historical Precedents Shape Contemporary Constraints

Current trilateral dynamics are profoundly influenced by historical precedents that create both opportunities for cooperation and structural limitations on deeper integration. The Korean War legacy continues to shape Chinese calculations, with PRC historians describing the relationship as creating "buyer's remorse" rather than cementing a permanent alliance.[39] More than one million Chinese casualties and massive economic costs during China's most vulnerable period created lasting skepticism about the costs of supporting the DPRK, or any other state, in military conflicts.

Additionally, the Sino-Soviet split of the 1960s established patterns that continue to influence contemporary relationships. The fundamental contradiction between ideological solidarity and great power national interests that drove the split remains relevant today.[40] Each country maintains strong concerns about preserving strategic independence while cooperating on specific issues, preventing the formation of a hierarchical alliance structure.

Finally, the DPRK's Juche ideology, formalized in 1955, systematically resists foreign dependence and creates barriers to deeper trilateral integration. Historical precedents include Kim Il Sung's 1958 rejection of Soviet proposals for joint submarine flotilla and communication systems,[41] demonstrating a consistent pattern of resistance to arrangements that might compromise sovereignty. Contemporary Russian philosopher Alexander Dugin's praise for Juche as a model for "Russian sovereignty" shows ongoing ideological resonance but also highlights the limitations this creates for deeper cooperation. Today this is arguably even more pronounced, with a leadership in Pyongyang refusing to rely too much on any of its "allies" and partners, and the DPRKs growing international role and independence have been remarkable.

Strategic Implications for Regional Stability

Despite drawbacks, the China–DPRK–Russia trilateral relationship represents a significant challenge to Western interests while remaining fundamentally different from Cold War-era alliance structures. The partnerships are characterized by pragmatic cooperation rather than ideological alignment, bilateral arrangements rather than integrated command structures, and significant constraints based on national interests and global economic integration. That said, there is a political alignment against Western democracies and especially against the influence of the U.S. in international affairs, rather than around a new policy direction.

The most significant strategic implication is the demonstrated ability of these relationships to evolve rapidly and potentially deepen in response to external pressure. Russia's invasion of Ukraine catalyzed the deepest Russia–DPRK military cooperation since the 1950s while simultaneously creating new tensions with China over strategic priorities and regional influence. In practice, Russia has offered the DPRK combat experience and military development that China has not been able to provide, and has de facto increased strategic autonomy for the DPRK. This suggests that Western policy approaches must account for both the growing cooperation and

persistent limitations within these relationships.

The triangular relationship also demonstrates the limits of sanctions and economic pressure as tools for constraining cooperation. Sophisticated circumvention networks, alternative payment systems, and complementary capabilities allow the three countries to maintain substantial cooperation despite extensive international restrictions. However, the failure of major projects like Arctic LNG 2 shows that economic pressure can create significant constraints when consistently applied.

Conclusion

The PRC–DPRK–Russia relationship from 2020 to 2025 reveals a complex pattern of tactical cooperation constrained by strategic competition and historical grievances. While significant developments like the Russia–DPRK mutual defense treaty and expanded military cooperation represent genuine challenges to Western interests, the persistent bilateral nature of these relationships and their susceptibility to external pressure suggest opportunities for Western diplomacy to manage and potentially exploit divisions within the triangle.

The relationship's evolution demonstrates that beneath the surface of cooperation lie fundamental tensions that prevent deeper integration. China's territorial claims against Russia, DPRK's resistance to any external influence, and competing approaches to international relations create structural limitations that are likely to persist regardless of external pressure. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for developing effective policy responses that account for both cooperation and competition within this complex trilateral relationship.

It has become increasingly clear that China is the country that has lost the most in recent developments, while still being viewed as the "older brother." The youngest sibling, the DPRK, has masterfully utilized the situation, increasing its strategic maneuverability, economic independence, and international role to an unprecedented level. It is not unlikely that China's unhappiness with the current trajectory will become more visible in the near future, potentially destabilizing its relations with both actors, but most likely with Russia.

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