


Pyongyang's Evolving Relations with Moscow and Beijing

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Pyongyang's Relations with Moscow and Beijing

An increasingly capable nuclear North Korea is seemingly growing closer to both Russia and China. While converging interests between the three states exist, there are limits to how deep their partnership runs and consequently risks of overestimating the extent of their coordination and cooperation. Nevertheless, security threats arising from these developing relationships are increasingly important and have implications for not only Northeast Asia, but also Europe.

By N vine Schepers

In April 2024, Russia voted against the extension of the mandate of the UN Panel of Experts that monitored international compliance with sanctions imposed on North Korea over the last 14 years. While sanctions will remain in place under various UN Security Council resolutions, they will become even more difficult to enforce, providing Pyongyang with further space to continue its nuclear and ballistic missile developments. Given that Russia now uses North Korean ballistic missiles in its war of aggression against Ukraine, the veto does not come as a surprise to many observers. It also follows a summit between North Korean leader Kim Jong-Un and Russian President Vladimir Putin in September 2023, which foreshadowed closer engagement between the two states. China, for its part, abstained from the vote on the Panel of Experts, following a joint veto with Russia in 2022 to impose further sanctions on North Korea following ballistic missile tests.

China's and Russia's apparent disinterest in further restraining North Korea's nuclear program highlights an emerging alignment of interests between the three states and directly undermines past efforts to prevent nuclear proliferation in the region. Since the failure of US diplomatic efforts to rein in North Korea's nuclear capabilities at the Hanoi summit in February 2019, Kim Jong-Un has overseen significant efforts to



Putin and Kim visit the Vostochny Cosmodrome in the far eastern Amur region in Russia on 13 September 2023. *Sputnik / Artem Geodakyan / Pool via Reuters*

develop, modernize, and diversify North Korea's nuclear and ballistic missile arsenal. He has also set aside longstanding goals to normalize relations with the US in favor of closer strategic alignment with both Russia and China.

Consequently, the Biden administration has placed a strong focus on relations with allies in the region such as South Korea and Japan, including by strengthening ex-

tended nuclear deterrence mechanisms and encouraging allies to reinforce conventional defenses. These developments reinstate the Korean Peninsula as a focal point of escalating geostrategic tensions between the US and its allies on one side, and the strengthened partnership of Russia, China, and North Korea on the other. However, much remains uncertain as to what the depth and breadth of increased cooperation and coordination between Russia,

China, and North Korea concretely implies. Differences in the scope of each bilateral relationship and how they influence each other also caution against overestimating the impact of this emerging trilateral partnership. This analysis will examine the implications of North Korea's nuclear developments and evolving relationships with Moscow and Beijing for international security and global non-proliferation efforts.

A Dangerous Arsenal

Pyongyang made considerable technological advances between 2016 and 2018, conducting three nuclear tests, one of which was likely a thermonuclear device, and a number of ballistic missile tests, including the successful test of intercontinental-range ballistic missiles that can reach the

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continental US. Further testing was put on hold during a period of diplomacy with both South Korea and the US. When talks failed to produce an agreement, Kim returned to investing significant effort towards building up, diversifying, and strengthening North Korea's nuclear and conventional forces.

These efforts started with the resumption of shorter-range missile tests, which increased dramatically in number, range, and type particularly since 2022. The Center for Nonproliferation Studies' database [records](#) 149 launches of missiles capable of delivering a payload of 500 kg over at least 300 km between January 2019 and April 2024. These tests, along with investments in production capacities, have demonstrated qualitative improvements in maneuverability, precision, reliability, and the use of different launching platforms and bases, increasing North Korea's overall operational readiness. Significant uncertainty remains regarding the status of several capabilities, including whether these systems are capable of supporting a nuclear mission. However, the diversity of systems on display over the years has increased the survivability and credibility of the North Korean deterrent.

While Pyongyang has not conducted further nuclear tests since 2017, it has continued to grow its stocks of fissile material. Current analyses of North Korea's nuclear

arsenal often estimate the nation possesses between 20 and 60 nuclear weapons. Calculations are based on the estimated amount of fissile material North Korea has produced, allowing for variations depending on the design and yield of weapons. Based on fissile material production projections, expert assessments [judge](#) that North Korea is likely able to build approximately six new warheads per year. This number may change depending on whether it can ramp up fuel production, particularly plutonium production. A seventh nuclear test is also highly likely although hard to predict, but could serve to improve warhead designs and miniaturization.

North Korea's nuclear policy has evolved over the last several years, notably through changes in nuclear rhetoric and the enactment of a new law in 2022 that outlines certain scenarios for nuclear use. These changes have several implications. First, Pyongyang no longer sees its nuclear weapons as bargaining chips, effectively closing the door to further negotiations on denuclearization. Second, North Korea's declared emphasis on tactical nuclear weapons highlights a pre-emptive nuclear posture, whereby it would respond by nuclear force to attempts by the US or South Korea to eliminate its leadership through so-called "decapitation strikes" (see [CSSA n°311](#)). Should a conflict occur on the Peninsula, pre-emption strategies on both sides of the 38th parallel make nuclear escalation increasingly likely.

In isolation, North Korea, armed with a more survivable nuclear deterrent, already forms a significant threat to regional stability. Recent efforts to cooperate more closely

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with Russia and China raise concerns as to what a more coordinated trilateral partnership could do to disrupt the Western-led rules-based international order.

Cautious Neighbors

Since the end of the Cold War, the depth of North Korea's relations with both of its much larger neighbors has often been overstated or misinterpreted. Key differences also exist as to the nature of Pyong-

yang's respective relationships with Moscow and Beijing. The collapse of the Soviet Union caused a period of great upheaval for Pyongyang given the significant economic and security support it received from the USSR. In parallel, China's developing diplomatic and economic relations with South Korea led to mistrust despite the continued existence of the 1961 Sino-North Korean Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Assistance. Attempting to normalize relations with the US, developing a nuclear program, and pursuing a policy of self-reliance all served to balance against perceived risks of dependency on Russia and China.

On their part, Moscow and Beijing have generally seen North Korea as a buffer state between them and US ally South Korea, where 28,500 US soldiers are currently stationed. Beijing, however, sees the US network of allies and military presence in the region as more strategically threatening. While the survival of the Kim regime is a key priority, Beijing and Moscow have previously supported denuclearization efforts as a North Korean nuclear program threatens to destabilize the Peninsula, risks prompting increased US involvement in the region, and heightens the likelihood of war. Both voted in favor of UN Security Council sanctions on North Korea between 2006 and 2017, also limiting the scope of cooperation at times.

Until recently, North Korea-Russia relations have amounted to very little in economic, military, and diplomatic terms. China, on the other hand, has become North Korea's main commercial partner over the last two decades, gaining some economic leverage. This follows Beijing's policy that the collapse of the North Korean state would run counter to its own security interests. Nevertheless, China has remained cautious of North Korean leadership and policies. Tensions between North Korea and the US over nuclear and missile tests between 2016 and 2018

also concerned China given they raised the specter of a military crisis in the region. However, when Pyongyang and Washington subsequently entered into direct negotiations, Beijing also worried it would be excluded from discussions that would impact its own national interests.

The narrow scale of North Korea's relations with Russia over the last three decades, its primarily economic relationship with

China, and the distrust that has permeated both these relationships serves to highlight the extent of changes seen since 2019. It also cautions against presuming too much from either relationship or drawing hasty conclusions about the scope of what is now often termed as an authoritarian or nuclear “axis” in Northeast Asia.

Improving Ties

While Kim's foreign policy priorities had already shifted by 2019, the COVID-19 pandemic slowed down his efforts to reach out to either China or Russia. Trade with China ground close to a halt for more than two years but has now nearly recovered to pre-pandemic levels. Today, China accounts for more than 90 per cent of North Korea's trade, with imports from China reaching about 2 billion USD and exports about 292 million USD in 2023 – a highly uneven economic relationship. Diplomatic exchanges have also resumed; notably, 2024 marks the 75th anniversary of North Korea-China relations. Thus far, the specifics of how both states plan to enhance their cooperation remain unclear. However, anniversary years offer crucial opportunities to introduce new initiatives and projects, potentially during a leaders' summit. Given Pyongyang's recent focus on Moscow, Bei-

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jing may want to regain some leverage and influence over developments on its eastern border.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 served as a catalyst for North Korea to showcase its public support of Moscow. North Korea has stood out as one of the few states openly endorsing Russia's conflict in Ukraine, extending diplomatic support and providing material assistance by supplying arms to Moscow and deploying workers to the Russian-occupied territories in the Donbas region. The 2023 summit between Kim and Putin served to signal this renewed alignment between the two states, though cooperation still seems largely limited to the military realm. The summit, for example, included visits to aerospace sites, the Vostochny cosmodrome, the Russian Navy's Pacific Fleet

headquarters, and displays of ships, fighter jets, missiles, and artillery systems.

For Russia, North Korean military supplies and Chinese economic support have helped it regain the initiative in its war against Ukraine. This, in turn, has forced the US to keep its strategic focus on Europe rather than Asia. While this serves North Korean interests, further benefits to Kim's regime remain uncertain as yet, with various possibilities on the table. North Korea may benefit from cooperation on space launch technologies, components for its military aircraft, and materials for its missile programs. In the nuclear realm, Russia could provide assistance by directly supplying the Kim regime with fissile material or tritium, by sharing design information or nuclear test data, or by providing support for the development of technologies such as naval nuclear propulsion. Such developments would further increase strategic instability in Northeast Asia and potentially spur an arms race.

A Proliferation Problem

Any support by Moscow in the nuclear realm would be a significant departure both in terms of Russia-North Korea relations but also Russia's past efforts toward counter-proliferation. Even without additional support for North Korea's nuclear program, Russia is already damaging the non-proliferation regime by violating sanctions imposed on North Korea because of its nuclear and missile activities and by preventing the monitoring of sanctions implementation. The latter in particular severely damages one of the few tools that exist to enforce non-proliferation norms internationally, thereby weakening the credibility of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. It forces states to create alternative initiatives to ensure sanctions implementation, coalescing around like-minded parties, which have less reach or impartiality than an UN-mandated panel of experts that works by consensus.

China's role is no less concerning in terms of preserving non-proliferation norms, if more ambiguous. By voting against further sanctions on North Korea and abstaining from the panel of experts vote, Beijing is signaling that it does not believe in the use of sanctions to restrain North Korea's program. Without providing alternatives, it

also tacitly enables Pyongyang to further develop its arsenal and potentially proliferate certain technologies to other states. Yet, it is not in China's interests to appear com-

All three states currently see benefits to advancing the state of their relationships.

PLICIT in proliferation. Moreover, China seeks to avoid the prospect of an increasingly capable and provocative nuclear North Korea on its border. Such a scenario may engender heightened US involvement in Northeast Asia and the potential deployment of US nuclear assets to the region. Furthermore, it could catalyze the development of a nuclear program in South Korea.

In North Korea's case, the weakening of the sanctions regime is even more problematic as sanctions relief loses value as leverage during future potential negotiations. Given that the US' North Korea policy over the last five years mainly focused on sanctions, the gradual decline of their effectiveness urges a broad rethink of how to deal with Pyongyang. With ongoing crises in Europe and the Middle East during an election year, North Korea is unlikely to make it back to the top of the Biden administration's priorities list. Increased coordination between Russia, China, and North Korea, however, provides a different angle and new set of concerns to the US.

Limited Prospects

While it is necessary to look at the combined effects and risks of a greater alignment between Russia, China, and North Korea in the military, economic, and political domains, experts have also been cautious not to overestimate the depth of their relationships or their capacity to coordinate bilaterally, let alone trilaterally. All three states currently see benefits to advancing the state of their relationships. These remain quite transactional for now, even if coated in pomp and summitry. They also all oppose a Western-led security order in the region and what they perceive as a Western vision of an international rules-based order. There is, however, no shared vision of what the alternative should be. China has been investing more political and financial capital in promoting alternatives to such an order beyond the region.

The development of Russia-North Korea relations will depend in part on how far Russia is willing to go – and how much it is

willing to pay – to achieve its war objectives. Benefitting from Russia's war economy will have its limits in the medium- to long-term for North Korea. There may be some more clarity about further areas of cooperation during a likely Putin-Kim summit. More-

So far, Moscow and Beijing's respective bilateral relationships with Pyongyang do not significantly interfere with one another.

over, China-North Korea relations will be interesting to follow this year, as Beijing seeks to regain influence over Pyongyang through further economic, political, security, and cultural ties. China also comes under more pressure to "rein in" North Korea, leading it to be more cautious in its approach.

The evolution of Sino-Russian relations goes well beyond how they may deal and interact with North Korea, also limiting Pyongyang's bandwidth to try to play one against the other. While Beijing may not have been delighted to be perceived publicly as relegated to a second place, its economic leverage over Pyongyang still weighs heavily on the relationship. So far, Moscow and Beijing's respective bilateral relationships with Pyongyang do not significantly interfere with one another.

This could change depending on a number of factors. These include how emboldened or provocative North Korea may become and whether North Korean actions will impact the US presence in the region. Russia providing significant nuclear assistance to North Korea would negatively

affect Chinese interests and influence Beijing's position. Finally, the future of China's trade relationships with the West, and particularly South Korea, also has an effect on the degree of tolerance Beijing might have toward destabilizing actions by Pyongyang.

For more on perspectives on Euro-Atlantic Security, see [CSS core theme page](#).

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