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# A pact of pariahs?

## Russia needs munitions, North Korea modern military technology. Could closer cooperation be a win–win situation for both?

In mid-September, Kim Jong Un travelled to Russia's Far East. It was the North Korean dictator's first foreign trip since the Covid-19 pandemic. The main agenda item at his meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin was military cooperation. Putin's concern was North Korean artillery munitions, which he urgently needs for his war against Ukraine. Artillery shells and other conventional munitions are apparently abundant in the Kim dynasty's realm. North Korea is particularly keen on Russian technology to develop its ambitious nuclear, missile and satellite programme.

But we can only guess whether or when any concrete cooperation might ensue. Putin spoke only of the 'possibilities' of military cooperation. Yet, North Korea was one of just five countries that opposed the UN General Assembly's 2022 resolution condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Pyongyang's largely isolated government wanted to show solidarity with Russia's 'struggle for sovereignty and security'. So, will there be a pact of pariahs? That would certainly benefit the two military hardliners.

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The programme for Kim's visit is illuminating; Putin welcomed him at the Vostochny cosmodrome in Siberia. After the meeting, Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu took the North Korean dictator to view advanced nuclear-capable strategic bombers at a military airbase near Vladivostok. Also on the itinerary were hypersonic Kinzhal missiles, which can carry both conventional and nuclear warheads. Kim also accompanied Shoigu on an inspection of Russia's Pacific Fleet in Vladivostok with its nuclear submarines.

Although Putin did not commit himself to North Korean weapons deliveries and even promised to abide by UN sanctions prohibiting

supplies of arms and military technology, Moscow's promises have little credibility in the wake of the Ukraine invasion. Putin quickly discards his commitments when they cease to serve his interests. Kim's visit poses a dual challenge: Russia could benefit from a new source of munitions for its war against Ukraine, and North Korea could gain long-term assistance for its nuclear, missile and satellite programme. Hence, closer cooperation could be a win–win outcome.

## A long and turbulent history

Relations between Russia/the Soviet Union and North Korea have been extremely turbulent, with many ups and downs. Clearly, Russia today has a renewed military-strategic interest in cooperation; North Korea's interest goes without saying. As an occupying force after the Second World War, the Soviet Union was North Korea's closest ally. Nuclear cooperation dates back to the 1960s. Pyongyang established a nuclear research centre with Soviet help and built a research reactor that went into operation in 1967. The Soviet Union supplied the fuel rods until 1973. In the initial phase of arms control negotiations in the early 1980s, the United States and the Soviets were able to persuade North Korea to ratify the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty and allow inspections by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). The Soviet Union and later Russia also repeatedly urged a halt to North Korea's nuclear programme.

Russian–North Korean relations changed fundamentally with Gorbachev's dramatic political reforms and the collapse of the Soviet Union. Military aid, industrial cooperation, food aid and energy supplies were reduced to almost nothing. North Korea's inability to settle its trade debts to Moscow led to political tensions. Not only that, but this period also saw an unexpected rapprochement with erstwhile Soviet adversary South Korea. After the Soviet collapse, the Yeltsin regime allowed the security pact with North Korea to expire and made no effort to renew it — the dissolution of the network of socialist states deprived North Korea of one of its economic mainstays.

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In the late 1990s, Moscow reviewed relations with the two Korean states and concluded that cooperation with South Korea had not met all its expectations and that Russian interests had not been taken into account in the so-called Agreed Framework. In this 1994 agreement, the United States had promised North Korea economic aid. International pressure elicited some concessions from the largely isolated

regime regarding its nuclear and missile programme. President Putin made a widely heralded visit to Pyongyang in 2000 and welcomed then-leader Kim Jong Il, father of the present dictator, to Moscow in 2001 and 2002 to improve relations.

As a result, Russia was finally admitted as a partner into the so-called Six-Party Talks on North Korea's denuclearisation, also involving China, the United States, North and South Korea, and Japan. Within this framework, Russia pressed for both US concessions and a moratorium on the North Korean nuclear programme. But Moscow did not make abandonment of its nuclear programme a condition of economic cooperation and offered gas deliveries – subsidised by South Korea – to help North Korea cope with its energy shortages.

In 2006, North Korea agreed to relaunch a consortium to extend and modernise its railway lines to Russia (and possibly even to South Korea). Cooperation was abruptly discontinued after North Korea carried out its first nuclear test in October 2006. The UN Security Council then imposed comprehensive sanctions in a resolution that even China and Russia voted for. They are still in place today.

## Challenges for China

It is interesting that Kim travelled first to Russia, not China. After all, China was North Korea's sole supporter for many years, both politically and economically. Closer relations between Russia and North Korea could weaken Beijing's influence over both governments. In July, Russia's defence minister proposed joint military manoeuvres between China, Russia and North Korea in order to counter trilateral cooperation in the region between the United States, South Korea and Japan. The Chinese government was unenthusiastic. Such a policy would undermine China's own criticism of US 'bloc politics'. China is once again trying to perform a balancing act. North Korea's denuclearisation was Beijing's priority for so long. It had hoped to persuade the Pyongyang government to shutter its nuclear programme.

Paul Haenle, the US security expert who led the Bush administration's failed negotiations on ending North Korea's nuclear programme from 2007 to 2009, said in a New York Times interview on 16 September 2023 that whereas formerly geopolitics had taken a backseat to denuclearisation, the reverse was now true. In other words, Beijing now subordinates everything else to its geopolitical rivalry with the United States. A rapprochement between Moscow and Pyongyang could

therefore have unforeseeable consequences.



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