

RUSSIA-DPRK PARTNERSHIP: IMPLICATIONS FOR THE WEST

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This issue brief examines the evolving relationship between the DPRK and Russia, particularly since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The partnership has deepened, with North Korea supporting Russia diplomatically and receiving military and economic aid in return. This alliance, formalized during Putin's 2024 visit to Pyongyang, has significant implications for regional stability and global geopolitics, including for Europe. The DPRK-Russia Comprehensive Strategic Partnership encompasses military, economic, and technological cooperation, challenging U.S.-ROK alliance strategies and potentially intensifying regional arms races and provocations. The DPRK's selective engagement strategy underscores its prioritization of relationships that bolster its security and economic interests amidst global tensions.

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Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, there has been a gradual yet quite evident shift in many of the world's geopolitical hotspots. The situation on the Korean Peninsula, and mainly the People's Democratic Republic of Korea (DPRK) is not exempt from this dynamic. Since March 2022, the world has seen a significant shift in the relationship between the DPRK and Russia. Vladimir Putin visited the DPRK for the first time since July 2000, on June 18-19, 2024. The trip and its outcome hold considerable diplomatic importance.

North Korea was among the five nations that opposed the UN resolution in early March 2022, condemning Russia's invasion. Additionally, North Korea was one of the initial three countries to acknowledge the independence of the Donetsk People's Republic and Luhansk People's Republic, the two regions in eastern Ukraine under Russian occupation. Reportedly, the DPRK delivered infantry rockets and missiles to the Wagner Private Military Company, one of Russia's military arms, as of the end of 2022, in exchange for coal, oil, and other goods from Russia.¹ This was not the

first arms shipment, however, as Pyongyang was accused of covertly supplying a significant amount of artillery shells to Moscow in November 2022.² From this point forward, the DPRK and Russia have both deepened and gradually broadened the scope of their relationship, responding to and reciprocating each other's respective needs.

In return, Moscow has been openly playing as Pyongyang's shield within international fora such as the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), vetoing sanctions and other measures aimed at punishing Pyongyang for its infractions while lambasting Washington and the West for their aggressive policies, both towards itself and the North.³ Leading Russian figures such as former Premier Dmitry Medvedev openly stated that were the DPRK and Russia to be lacking nuclear weapons, the West would have already attacked them.⁴ Furthermore, Russia has been secretly shielding and aiding the DPRK in its quest to pursue more advanced nuclear and conventional military capabilities, supporting, for instance, missile launches as well as space industry initiatives.⁵

The implications of the burgeoning relationship between Russia and the DPRK go well beyond bilateral or regional and extend into the global arena. The delicate balance achieved in Northeast Asia is currently fraying, worsening threat perceptions, pushing regional powers such as the Republic of Korea and Japan to increase their own military spending, strengthen bilateral and trilateral relations with the United States, or even consider riskier policy options which could further heighten structural risks and situational risks of nuclear war.⁶

Against this backdrop, underscoring the unprecedentedness of the current state of Russia-DPRK relations, this brief aims to elucidate the significance and the reasoning behind Putin's visit to Pyongyang and its future implications.

The Significance of Putin's Visit

As announced by both Russian and North Korean state media in early June, Putin was supposed to reciprocate Kim Jong Un's September 2023 visit to the Amur Oblast in the Russian Far East.⁷ Putin's trip can be viewed as

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the culmination of the several high-level visits that took place in the preceding year: in July 2023, then-Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu joined a Chinese delegation to Pyongyang; after Kim's September trip, Choe Son Hui, DPRK's Foreign Minister met her Russian counterpart Sergei Lavrov in Moscow in January 2024.⁸

In his first visit to Pyongyang in 24 years, Putin was joined by a distinguished delegation, including Russian Defence Minister Andrei Belousov, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, the ministers of natural resources, health, and transport, as well as the heads of the Russian space agency and railways, and Deputy Prime Minister Alexander Novak, who handles energy matters. The pronounced emphasis on security matters witnessed during the visit should not have come as a surprise; rather, as foreshadowed by the statements of Yuri Ushakov, Putin's foreign policy adviser, ahead of the trip, Russia and the DPRK were discussing the signing of a partnership agreement, potentially addressing security concerns.⁹

The visit featured direct talks between the leaders, a gala concert, a state reception, honor guards, document signings, and a media statement, culminating in the signing of the DPRK-Russia Treaty on Comprehensive Strategic Partnership on June 19. DPRK state media

outlet Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) released the full text in English in a rather unusual manner, given that Russia has chosen not to release it.¹⁰ The document served as a formal acknowledgment of the enduring defense-oriented relationship between Moscow and Pyongyang while also solidifying a long-term strategic outlook on various fronts. Additionally, the visit resulted in Putin reiterating Russia's commitment to openly aid the DPRK, calling for a review of the UNSC sanctions regime and denouncing its undue impacts on the DPRK's economy. Putin also drew a symbolic parallel between the hardships faced by North Koreans and those endured by his brothers during the World War II Siege of Leningrad.¹¹

The elaborate diplomatic formalisms that preceded and characterized the meeting itself highlight a great level of acknowledgment for North Korea, which has been largely excluded from global political discussions. The high-level reciprocal visits between Russia and North Korea, including Kim Jong Un's significant trip to Russia's Far East, culminating in Putin's visit to Pyongyang, are smaller manifestations of a larger issue,

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namely the profound acknowledgment of the DPRK's status on par with Russia.¹² Putin's letter published in the *Rodong Sinmun* ahead of the visit, for instance, highlighted the 70-year robust relationship built on equality and mutual respect, thanked Pyongyang for supporting Russia's actions in Ukraine, and pledged to support the DPRK against U.S. pressures and to build a new security architecture in Eurasia with alternative trade mechanisms to resist Western restrictions.¹³ Additionally, the partnership between the two, dubbed a groundbreaking document by Putin himself, cements the recognition of the DPRK as a partner on the same footing.¹⁴ These actions collectively reinforce North Korea's prominent role in the evolving global geopolitical landscape.¹⁵

Quite notably, the DPRK-Russia Comprehensive Strategic Partnership enshrines fully this recognition of the DPRK as a political actor with global reach. The partnership, reminiscent of the 1961 Soviet-DPRK treaty due to a mutual defense clause enshrined in Article 4, and expanded upon in the 5th, encompasses long-term cooperation across military, economic, sociocultural, and political spheres, even sanctioned ones, potentially resulting in substantial impacts on regional and global stability. Article 6 polices the actions of Moscow and Pyongyang, requiring each side to avoid agreements or actions with third countries that undermine the other's sovereignty, security, or core interests. Articles 8 to 14 enshrine a long-term perspective within the relationship, encompassing military cooperation (Article 8), broad economic cooperation (Articles 9 and 10), and specific interactions in various fields (Articles 11 to 14) as objectives and possibilities.¹⁶

This bolsters and formalizes the DPRK's ties with Russia to the point that Kim Jong Un himself referred to the relationship as an alliance. Additionally, the treaty gives legal status to trade exchanges and the ministerial discussions within various fields of cooperation beyond arms trade, for instance, mining and agriculture, between Russia and the DPRK over the last few months. Notably, as of April 2024 several North Korean oil tankers that allegedly violated UNSC resolutions visited a far eastern Russian port and were apparently loaded

with refined petroleum products that were shipped back to North Korea. Further, the return of the Lady K freighter in early May and the Angara cargo ship to the port of Rason in conjunction with Putin's visit indicates the continuation of trade between the two.¹⁷

Additionally, the Articles detailed above coupled with reports of undeterred arms trade and technological transfer between Moscow and Pyongyang and the looming possibility of joint naval drills will likely have a detrimental impact on regional stability giving flight to the arms race and the ensuing heightened threat perceptions.¹⁸ Additionally, given that the partnership points to stronger military, technological, arms transfer and general security cooperation between Moscow and Pyongyang, possibly resulting in both a faster and more diverse military buildup in the DPRK, it will provide the U.S.-ROK alliance with new challenges. Foremost among these new challenges is how to understand and assess the clauses in the agreement that pledge "immediate military and other assistance in case of armed aggression." Intentionally kept vague, this provision will influence strategic and tactical threat assessments, as the U.S.-ROK operational planning will need to account for an additional, less predictable factor: The extent and nature of Russian military support, especially in the event of a contingency.

While the recognition granted by the treaty and the accompanying diplomatic gestures may not perfectly align with Moscow's political interests, they represent a transactional and somewhat expected concession to Pyongyang and a long-term survival and strategic choice in Moscow. Putin's visit to Pyongyang was his fourth official trip to a foreign country since his re-election in March. From Moscow's perspective, this visit might have been dictated by necessity. Since the invasion of Ukraine and the ensuing backlash from Western nations, through sanctions and other means, Russia has found itself partially isolated. The treaty inked with the DPRK serves a broader foreign policy priority of focusing and securing Russia's traditional spheres of influence while maintaining and increasing access to critical resources amid a geopolitical outlook marred by Sino-American strategic competition, greater and growing de-alignment

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The DPRK is well positioned to offer access to multiple resources which Russia desperately needs. The arms trade between Russia and the DPRK has been continuing for over two years now, and Russia has reciprocated in kind providing food, raw materials, parts, and technology required for weapons manufacturing. Additionally, Russia has seemingly been offering financial support as well, as indicated by the release of \$9 million from the \$30 million DPRK assets frozen in a Russian bank.¹⁹ However, Russia, like the DPRK, is aware that while expanded military trade with the DPRK will prove beneficial in the short to mid-term, it will likely not continue beyond Russia's involvement in Ukraine. Therefore, Russia has been stipulating agreements and pursuing collaborative trade initiatives with the DPRK in order to instigate long-term economic cooperation, weather the loss of European markets, and establish a well-tried and tested channel of sanctions' circumvention.²⁰

Influence on DPRK's Foreign Policy

In the context of the DPRK's current international relations, the visit underscores Pyongyang's growing interest in deepening its burgeoning relationship with Russia. This is part of a broader intent to maintain and expand ties with its traditional security and economic lifelines, especially China, against the backdrop of growing Sino-American competition and worsening relations with European nations. After four years of isolation from the global community, the DPRK appears to be gradually pursuing re-engagement, albeit highly selectively in maintaining control over granting access to the country only to "trusted" diplomatic counterparts, as exemplified by the cancellation of visits by delegations from several European countries.²¹

By January 2023, nine countries maintained functioning embassies in Pyongyang, but only China, Russia, Mongolia, and Cuba had been allowed to rotate their embassy staff since the previous year.²² As of June 17, 2024, ambassadors from Brazil and Nicaragua have taken up their posts in North Korea.²³ Additionally, the DPRK permitted German and Swedish delegations to enter the country in late February to inspect abandoned embassy properties.²⁴ However, in May, the DPRK canceled or postponed further visits by diplomats from the U.K., Germany, the Czech Republic, Switzerland, and Poland.²⁵

This decision to limit European visitors can be interpreted in several ways. First, Russian influence

in Pyongyang may be stronger than often recognized. While the current relationship between Russia and the DPRK appears to favor Pyongyang, the long-term benefits of their partnership for Russia should not be underestimated.

Second, with the deterioration of relations between Russia and the European Union, alongside the increasing tension between European nations and China, the DPRK might see little value in fostering relationships with Europe, in the short to medium term. Since the outbreak of COVID-19, the European Union and European nations generally did not engage directly or offer words of solidarity to the DPRK. While Pyongyang's isolation was self-inflicted, the lack of interest shown, if not instances of condemnation of DPRK activities, especially due to the inward turn prompted by the conflict in Ukraine and the domestic reverberations of the ongoing Israel-Gaza war has seemingly condemned any possibility of engagement.²⁶ Given its current lack of leverage or pressure points to sway European nations, combined with the aforementioned disinterest and past failures, as well as the limited influence Europe holds over negotiations on the Korean Peninsula, the DPRK has diminished incentives to expend political and economic capital on engagement endeavors it possibly perceives as destined to fail from the outset. The DPRK may for now view the majority if not all European delegations as non-essential visitors following its new stance of rejecting unification and reducing external propaganda.²⁷ From a European perspective, while engagement with the DPRK is somewhat of a necessity to avoid military escalation on the Peninsula, curb possibilities of non-proliferation including the ongoing arms supply to support Russia's war against Ukraine, and halt the DPRK nuclear program, the incumbent political cost to bring Pyongyang back to the negotiations table might have become too steep. However, in the longer term, the DPRK is likely to maintain contact with a select few European nations to avoid over-reliance on a small number of authoritarian states.

Third, as part of a broader anti-Western sentiment among several non-democratic countries, we are currently witnessing a strengthening of relations between

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nations like Russia, Belarus, North Korea, and Iran, all of which are closely aligned with China in different ways. These relationships are not based on traditional, institutionalized connections but rather on personal ties and informal agreements. They share a strong rejection of the U.S.-led rules-based international order, employ hybrid tactics, exercise strict domestic control over their citizens, and are committed to preserving the current domestic political status quo.

Additionally, amid the ongoing Sino-American competition and the upcoming U.S. presidential elections in November, the DPRK may be approaching its reopening to European nations, and by extension to the U.S., with caution. Even re-engaging under a Trump presidency, keen on solving the DPRK's quandary as reported this May, might be an impossibility.²⁸ The DPRK has historically been an opportunistic diplomatic engager, pursuing interactions that offered it benefits and especially the recognition it has always yearned for. The feasibility of engagement with the current administration or another Democratic Party-controlled White House is unlikely due to the general penchant for strategic patience and a preference for rhetorical rather than substantive engagement with the DPRK.

A Trump administration might pursue another round of high-level diplomatic engagements; however, from Pyongyang's perspective, such an endeavor might not be feasible or in their best interests. Given that any engagement with the U.S. is indivisibly bound and dependent on Kim Jong Un's participation, the diplomatic costs of failure might be too high to bear. The last round of engagement with Washington was a failure and had Kim Jong Un leave Hanoi empty-handed. While hard to decipher, convincing the more hawkish and anti-engagement factions within the DPRK's political apparatus might first be a Herculean task, potentially leaving the DPRK in a tantalizing situation. In this scenario, Kim Jong Un's persona could suffer domestically, tearing down the guise of infallibility and grandiosity built over the past few years. Therefore, unwilling to engage in relationships that do not offer the benefits or the recognition it seeks or focus solely on denuclearization, which opposes Pyongyang's interests,

The deal will likely further contribute to the ongoing arms race in the region, as the DPRK, with Russian support, will be able to both continue and diversify its military buildup. This will make operational planning within the U.S.-ROK alliance more challenging as they will have to assess the amount and type of Russian military support.

the DPRK has little to gain from the U.S. or European nations. A precondition for any substantial engagement is likely to position denuclearization not as an immediate primary objective but rather as a desirable end goal.

Conclusion

Given the worsening relations between the U.S. and its allies with Russia, China, and their partners, the DPRK may prioritize relationships that safeguard its interests, particularly within the UNSC. Playing into the "Axis of Upheaval"²⁹ argument that has recently taken center stage within Western circles, Putin's visit, resulting in the Treaty on Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, strengthens the Russia-DPRK relationship and gives both the legal basis announced by Kim and a long-term outlook, which it previously lacked.³⁰ From a regional perspective, the DPRK-Russia treaty completes the array of agreements—the China-DPRK agreement for instance—necessary to ensure a response to U.S.-led initiatives in Northeast Asia and the broader Indo-Pacific region, like the AUKUS and Quad initiatives. Additionally, the treaty serves the double purpose of bolstering the DPRK back onto the global stage and refocusing Russia's efforts, albeit possibly in a superficial

manner, onto the East Asia realm, in a bid to redirect Western focus from Ukraine, especially in concomitance with major events like the EU, Iranian and U.S. elections.

Furthermore, as partly confirmed by the trade exchanges and the ministerial discussions on mining and agriculture between Russia and the DPRK over the last few months, the treaty will contribute to improvements in the DPRK economy through enhanced trade, infrastructure development, technological support, and training. The deal will likely further contribute to the ongoing arms race in the region, as the DPRK, with Russian support, will be able to both continue and diversify its military buildup. This will make operational planning within the U.S.-ROK alliance more challenging as they will have to assess the amount and type of Russian military support. One area where it is difficult to make an assessment is the risk of continued provocations and the risk of military conflict. This could play out in both directions, with the DPRK feeling safer and not needing to provoke or feeling bolder and increasing provocations. The current lack of proper crisis management instruments in the region makes the situation fragile, but a major military conflict is not in the interest of either China or Russia.

In our previous paper on Russia-DPRK relations, we stated that “there seems to be some substance in the improved Russia-DPRK relations that goes beyond mere transactional engagement. However, there is no real depth in the relationship; to some extent, they are pushed towards each other by external factors.” With the new DPRK-Russia Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, however, the two countries have clearly entered a more ambitious and comprehensive phase in their relationship, with greater depth, which not only challenges the U.S.-ROK alliance but also has significant implications for Europe. As a consequence, there are likely to be more high-level visits, more joint programs and generally more cooperation between Russia and DPRK.

Note: This issue brief is a follow-on paper from “Russia-DPRK relations: Long-term or ad-hoc?” published on the ISDP website on May 2, 2024.

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