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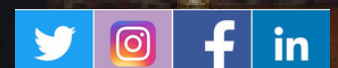
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SHIFTING ALLIANCES: RUSSIA AND NORTH KOREA'S GROWING TIES AND REGIONAL SECURITY IMPLICATIONS

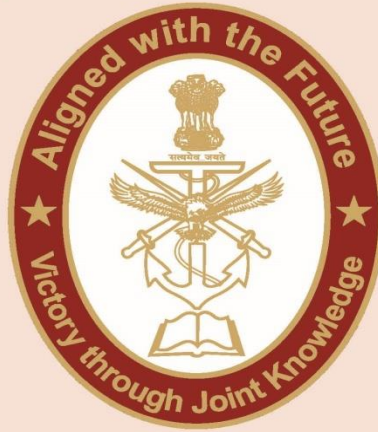
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SHIFTING ALLIANCES: RUSSIA AND NORTH KOREA'S GROWING TIES AND REGIONAL SECURITY IMPLICATIONS



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Introduction

The relationship between Russia and North Korea has evolved into a significant geopolitical development, marked by a series of diplomatic, economic and military engagements. Historically, when the erstwhile Soviet Union existed, it maintained a supportive relationship with North Korea, particularly at the peak of the Cold War and the Korean War. When the erstwhile Soviet Union disintegrated in 1991, the relationship witnessed a relative stagnation and shifting alliances. Nonetheless, Russia's growing interest in reasserting its influence in East Asia and North Korea's desire for strategic support have converged to shape the revival of the present bilateral ties. The resurgence of cooperation between Moscow and Pyongyang can be attributed to a variety of factors, including shared geopolitical interests, mutual apprehension for a Western led order and economic necessity.

For Russia, North Korea represents a potential counterbalance to the traditional US alliance system in the Indo-Pacific and in part in particular North East Asia. Russia's role as member of the United Nations Security Council and its involvement in the six-party talks have positioned it as an influential actor in the broader denuclearisation

issue that mars the Korean Peninsula. Meanwhile, North Korea continues to face ongoing international sanctions and growing diplomatic isolation, seeks to diversify its diplomatic options, making Russia a valuable partner in the region.

Furthermore, both countries view each other through the lens of strategic convenience. North Korea's nuclear ambitions have consistently placed it at odds with the international community, while Russia's desire to assert itself as a global power in a multipolar world aligns with Pyongyang's goal of reducing its dependence on China. This convergence has ushered momentum of high-level visits, economic collaboration and even military dialogue. Russia has become a key partner for North Korea, particularly in terms of trade, energy resources and military cooperation, including potential arms deals and joint defence development.

This growing nexus between Russia and North Korea raises important questions about regional stability, the future of US traditional alliances in North East Asia, UN sanctions on North Korea and other implications for regional as well as global security. As Russia continues to engage with North Korea, it is essential to examine the motivations behind this strengthening partnership and its potential fallout for the security architecture in North East Asia.

What has re-defined Russia-North Korea Relations?

Although the relations between Russia and North Korea had existed during the Cold War, it has only gained traction in the recent years. The attribution can be made to Russia's decision to conduct 'special operations' in Ukraine in February 2022¹, that it is now approaching towards Pyongyang with more fervour and optimism. The war in Ukraine which will soon turn 3 in February 2025, came heavily on Russia particularly in the form of sanctions. Ukraine's invasion prompted a "rapid escalation" in re-shaping relations between North Korea and Russia. Since then both countries have resorted to engaging at various platforms including bilateral meetings. The prolonged war has exhausted Russia's arms and weaponry and it is in need for some assistance to continue the war. This situation has allowed North Korea to leverage the situation for "short term" advantages in return for its famished and poor economy.²

North Korea's persistent nuclear development programs has resulted it to drawing further burden to the existing sanctions by the US and the UN.³ These sanctions have caused significant damage to the North Korea economy and led to diplomatic isolation that have helped earn its name as the 'Hermit Kingdom'. There remains a close correlation between pursuing relations with Russia and the 'regime survival' of North Korea's Supreme Leader Kim Jong Un. As the incumbent leader continues to accelerate his ambitions for North Korea's nuclear and missile development, it would seek any conceivable technological support from Russia that would permit his regime to augment the scope and sophistication of these missiles.⁴ North Korea places 'regime survival' as an integral part of its domestic policy and hence it would use the propaganda to strengthen the regime's social and ideological control over its people.

Presently, North Korea remains firmly committed to advancing its missile and nuclear weapons programs, with a clear objective of augmenting both the quality and quantity of its nuclear arsenals and associated systems. What raises particular concern regarding North Korea's nuclear development and its security cooperation with Russia is the regime's recalcitrance to engage in meaningful dialogue with both the US and South Korea. This steadfast refusal to negotiate discussions aimed at denuclearization underscores a growing challenge to regional security and continued erosion of diplomatic avenues for conflict resolution. Therefore, beyond the short-term advantages that North Korea could derive out of Russia in the backdrop of the Ukraine War is that it is also receiving "unwavering" support from Russia in the UN Security Council.⁵ Additionally, it will also receive a continued technological and military assistance that could possibly provide impetus for North Korea to accomplish its ambitions in the region.

Another notable factor is the inclusion of South Korea and Japan in NATO's annual summit. These events have amplified anxieties regarding the alliance's expanding footprints in the Indo-Pacific, potentially catalysing the formation of opposing security blocs. For Russia and North Korea, NATO's regional engagement signifies an extension of Western containment strategies, necessitating diplomatic convergence with each other. Consequently, NATO's involvement precipitates strategic recalibration, reinforcing equilibrium defining North East Asia's security architecture.⁶

Therefore, both parties were quick to recognize the broader significance of cultivating a strategic alliance in response to the evolving geopolitical dynamics within Eurasia and the Indo-Pacific.⁷ These actions hint that, unlike the Cold War or the early 2000s, Russia-North Korea relationship has moved beyond being transactional and approaching towards a long-term strategic and ideological partnership.⁸

The Treaty of Comprehensive Partnership: Impetus for bolstering Russia-North Korea Relations

Russian President Vladimir Putin visited North Korea for the first time in 24 years between June 18-19, 2024. During the visit, both countries signed the 'Treaty of Comprehensive Partnership' representing a 'breakthrough' in their bilateral relationship, ushering a new level of strategic partnership.⁹ The conclusion of this agreement, incorporating a mutual defence treaty, represented a pivotal moment in the bilateral relationship between the two countries. By virtue of Article 4 of the treaty, both Russia and North Korea have committed to extending "military and other forms of assistance" in the event of any contingency.¹⁰ This article represents a similarity with respect to NATO's arrangements. "In case any one of the two sides is put in a state of war by an armed invasion from an individual state or several states, the other side shall provide military and other assistance with all means in its possession without delay in accordance with Article 51 of the UN Charter and the laws of the DPRK and the Russian Federation," Article 4 of the agreement stated, according to *Reuters*.

Article 23 emphasized on the nature of treaty that shall remain for an 'indefinite' duration, further solidifying the long-term commitment between Russia and North Korea. Notably, the vagueness surrounding the exact nature of the assistance to be provided reflects a deliberate strategy to preserve flexibility, thereby enabling future escalation of cooperation. Further, the signing of the treaty should not be seen in isolation, as the potential for intensified North Korea-Russia relations, particularly in response to the increasing West's support for Ukraine, remains a significant consideration.¹¹

Military-Technical Cooperation: A Subset of the Treaty

Russian Defence Minister Andrei Belousov embarked on an official visit to North Korea on November 29, 2024.¹² Although the identities of the individuals he was scheduled to meet remains undisclosed, the visit marks a significant step in the operationalisation of bilateral treaty and highlights the growing ties between the two states.

The trajectory of military-technical cooperation between Russia and North Korea is poised for significant acceleration. Historically, Russia had made commitment to supply North Korea with niche technologies and the North Korean State Media, KCNA has emphasised the potential for joint military capabilities and coordinated training exercises. There have been reports from the United States and its allies that Russia has received ammunitions from North Korea. In October 2024, KCNA confirmed that 10,000 soldiers from North Korea were sent to Russia to fight in Ukraine.¹³ This is alarming when both Europe and NATO have remained silent on North Korea's entry to the war.¹⁴

The provision of advanced technologies is expected to be of particular importance in this evolving relationship. While North Korea is believed to possess nuclear weapons, it is deficient in critical missile guidance systems, advanced warhead designs and re-entry vehicle technologies-factors that hinder the development of modern, long range nuclear weapons. The recent treaty underscores the focus on collaboration in fields such as science and technology, space exploration, nuclear energy applications.¹⁵ These areas of cooperation have raised significant concerns regarding their potential to bolster North Korea's nuclear program, which remains in violation of the UN sanctions. The implementation of the Treaty has already begun where North Korea reportedly delivered a significant consignment of military supplies to Russia, consisting of 13,000 containers of armaments that include 6 million 152 mm artillery shells.¹⁶ Furthermore, recent reports indicate that North Korea has extended its assistance by supplying Russia with advanced long-range rocket and artillery systems, specifically fifty 170 mm M1989 self-propelled howitzers and twenty 240 mm multiple rocket launchers.¹⁷

Perspectives from US, South Korea and Japan

Despite the varying interpretations of the North Korea-Russia relationship, the imperative of reinforcing bilateral and trilateral security cooperation among the US, Japan and South Korea remains a strategic response. While the outgoing Biden administration achieved limited progress in curbing North Korea's belligerent posture, it prioritized reaffirming alliances with both Japan and South Korea.¹⁸ This commitment was exemplified by the 'Washington Declaration' in April 2023¹⁹ and later consolidated through the trilateral 'Camp David Summit' in August 2023²⁰. These initiatives reflect broader efforts to strengthen regional deterrence and address the shifting security landscape in North East Asia.

US

"We, the Foreign Ministers of Australia, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the Republic of Korea, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, the United States, and the High Representative of the European Union condemn in the strongest possible terms the increasing military cooperation between the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) and the Russian Federation, including the deployment of DPRK troops to Russia for use on the battlefield against Ukraine. In a continued show of support and unity, we recall and reinforce our May 2024 coordinated sanctions action and joint statement on DPRK-Russia cooperation."²¹

On December 16, 2024, the US State Department issues the above statement underscoring growing apprehensions regarding the expanding strategic partnership between Russia and North Korea. The statement reflects the increasing precarious position of the US as it navigates through security dynamics in North East Asia. As a long standing power in the region, Washington remains acutely aware of the destabilizing implications of this "renewed" cooperation between Russia and North Korea. In response, the United States has pursued a multifaceted strategy aimed at reinforcing deterrence and maintaining strategic equilibrium. This has included intensifying joint military exercises with South Korea and Japan²², while reinforcing sanctions frameworks and enhancing trilateral security cooperation to mitigate any strategic ramification to its security umbrella in North East Asia.

Simultaneously, Washington has expanded its sanction framework within the United Nations, targeting North Korean financial institutions and key individuals that remain key links between the two countries. These measures reflect a broader effort by the US to avoid any destabilising potential and reaffirm its commitment to preserving the security architecture in the broader context of the Indo-Pacific.

The potential return of President-elect Donald Trump is expected to significantly influence the trajectory of diplomatic engagement in North East Asia, as evidenced by his administration's prior willingness to pursue direct dialogue with both Russia and North Korea. A hallmark of Trump's first term was the unprecedented personal summit with North Korean leader Kim Jong-Un, an event that marked a rare instance of high-level engagement between Washington and Pyongyang. The diplomatic overture, while yielding limited substantive outcomes underscored the possibility of future negotiations aimed at de-escalating tensions on the Korean Peninsula. Should similar diplomatic initiatives be pursued in Trump's upcoming term, the strategic calculus for South Korea and Japan may necessitate recalibration as renewed US-North Korea dialogue could introduce new variables into the regional security framework.

South Korea

The ongoing political turbulence in South Korea, particularly following the National Assembly passing a vote of impeachment for President Yoon Seok Yeol, has cast uncertainty over the nation's political stability and raised critical questions regarding the future strategic posture of the US and Japan in the region. Inter Korea relations significantly deteriorated during Yoon's tenure, driven by his administration's hardline stance towards Pyongyang, a policy that was subsequently reinforced through South Korea's Global Pivotal State and its Indo-Pacific Strategy document.

In response to the recent ratification of the Comprehensive Strategic Treaty between Russia and North Korea, the South Korean government had acted swiftly summoning the Russian Ambassador to express its strong opposition. South Korea's National Security Advisor, Chang Ho-jin, underscored Seoul's resolve as he remarked, "the country will not be bound by anything with regard to its assistance to Ukraine if Russia provides North Korea with precision weapons."²³ During the recently concluded Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Summit in Peru, the US, Japan and South

Korea jointly condemned the deepening Russia-North Korea alliance, characterising it as a destabilising factor that threatens to reshape regional security architecture. President Yoon further urged China's President Xi Jinping to exert influence over Pyongyang, emphasizing Beijing's pivotal role in curbing North Korea's military support to Moscow.²⁴

South Korea remains vulnerable to the dynamics between Russia and North Korea, particularly as it navigates its internal political realignment. Although the Judiciary's final decision on President Yoon's impeachment remains pending, the political landscape in the US will inevitably influence Seoul's future approach. The policy trajectory under the previous Moon Jae-in administration favoured diplomatic engagements with Pyongyang that contrasts starkly with Yoon's conservative policies. Inter-Korea relations is likely to hinge upon the outcome of the South Korea's domestic political process as well as the foreign policy orientation of President elect Trump. The return of Trump introduces further uncertainty as his previous term's policies towards Russia and North Korea involved dialogue and negotiations and this will certainly play a decisive role in shaping the security dynamics of not only the Korean Peninsula but North East Asia.

Japan

North Korea appears to be capitalizing on the current preoccupation of the international community with multiple concurrent conflicts to accelerate and expand its nuclear program with increased urgency and assertiveness. While these global crises command diplomatic focus of major powers, Japan continues to regard North Korea's military advancement as an enduring and immediate security concern.²⁵

Although Japan may face a comparatively lower level of direct exposure to potential North Korean aggression, Pyongyang's ballistic missile tests directly threaten Japan's territory and national security. Furthermore, Tokyo perceives the strengthening of ties between North Korea and Russia with heightened apprehension, given its longstanding territorial dispute with Moscow over the Kuril Islands. Japan's alignment with Western sanctions against Russia in response to the invasion of Ukraine has further exacerbated diplomatic tensions.

The growing nexus between Russia and North Korea underscores the need for strengthened trilateral cooperation between US, Japan and South Korea, despite any political regime change in these countries. Former Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida had mentioned, “what happened in Ukraine could easily happen in the Indo-Pacific”, basing the premise of his apprehensions on tensions in the Taiwan Strait and the Korean Peninsula.²⁶

Japan’s geographic proximity to regional flashpoints necessitates the incorporation of a comprehensive defence and crisis management strategies in close coordination with the US and South Korea. For Japan, the convergence of threats emanating from China, Russia and North Korea represents a multifaceted and multi front security challenge, heightening the risk of simultaneous confrontations across multiple theatres. Therefore, Japan remains postured towards the need for integrated deterrence measures, underpinned by trilateral cooperation. In this context, the evolving North Korea-Russia partnership represents an additional layer of strategic complexity, reinforcing Tokyo’s vigilance in the region.

The China Factor

China has ascended as both a pivotal regional and global power; however, a persistent academic discourse endures regarding the degree to which the Chinese leadership acquiesces to the intensifying bilateral ties between North Korea and Russia. Kurt Campbell, the US Deputy Secretary of State has articulated that China harbours growing unease regarding North Korea’s burgeoning engagement with Russia, particularly in light of the escalating cooperation between the two countries that China finds increasingly disconcerting.²⁷ This development has catalysed an expanding debate among the US security allies in Asia regarding China’s position on North Korea’s decision to deploy 10, 000 troops to support Russia in Ukraine.²⁸

China’s response to the burgeoning ties between Russia and North Korea is characterized by a nuanced and multifaceted approach, underscored by both strategic pragmatism and underlying apprehension. Historically, China has maintained a delicate yet pragmatic relationship with North Korea, driven by a shared interest in regional stability, the prevention of instability on the Korean Peninsula, and mutual resistance to

what both perceives as “hegemonic encroachments” by the US and its allies in North East Asia.

Despite China’s longstanding support for North Korea as a strategic ally, Beijing remains increasingly uncomfortable with Pyongyang’s overt military involvement in the Russian conflict, which it views as potentially exacerbating tensions with the West and emboldening US led efforts to further consolidate its security partnership with South Korea and Japan.²⁹ From China’s perspective, such developments may precipitate deepening trilateral partnership between the US and its allies and that is typically perceived by China as an “effort to encircle and strategically contain” it in the region. China’s view of the evolving alliance between North Korea and Russia is a product of ‘strategic calculation’ informed by both the desire to avoid alienating its North Korean ally and the recognition that such an alliance may complicate China’s broader geopolitical objectives. Beijing is acutely aware that the growing ties between the two countries could serve as a catalyst for further US led initiatives undermining its regional hegemony.

Possible Implications for India

The strengthening relationship between North Korea and Russia carries significant implications for India’s strategic, economic and diplomatic interests, particularly in the context of China’s expanding influence in the region. Enhanced cooperation between North Korea and Russia, especially in defence, energy and technology transfers, risks heightening instability in Asia. This could disrupt the Indo-Pacific security architecture, posing challenges to India’s Act East Policy.

India’s long-standing partnership with Russia, rooted in defence, energy and geopolitical cooperation, may face strain as Moscow deepens ties with both North Korea and China. The convergence of Russian, Chinese and North Korean interests could further marginalise US and allied influence in the region, complicating India’s efforts to balance its ties between Russia, the US and East Asian nations. Additionally, closer Russia-China-North Korea alignment might embolden Beijing’s assertiveness along the Northern frontier and the Indian Ocean, pressuring India’s strategic autonomy. To navigate this evolving dynamic, India may need to reinforce diplomatic

engagements with East Asian partners while leveraging its historic ties with Russia to mitigate adverse regional shifts.

Conclusion

The future trajectory of North Korea-Russia relations is likely to be shaped by two primary determinants; one pertains to the ongoing war in Ukraine and the extent to which Russia opts to prioritize domestic munitions production over continued reliance on arms imports from North Korea and second, arguably more consequential factor is the strategic posture that China may adopt. North Korea' escalating involvement in the Ukraine conflict is likely to provoke discomfort in Beijing, not only due to the deepening rapprochement between Kim Jong Un and Vladimir Putin but also in light of the strengthening trilateral cooperation between US, Japan and South Korea.

Despite these potential reservations, China, North Korea and Russia share a convergent interest in counterbalancing the US and challenging the US led international order. The future trajectory for the US, Japan and South Korea in addressing these challenges will likely center on strengthening trilateral cooperation and expanding regional deterrence framework. This could also mean an increase in joint military exercises, enhance missile defence capabilities and deepen intelligence sharing to counterbalance the emerging threat. With Trump coming in power, diplomatic engagements with Russia and North Korea. By reinforcing alliances and pursuing strategic dialogue, the US can work towards preserving regional stability and uphold the balance of power in North East Asia.

DISCLAIMER

The paper is author's individual scholastic articulation and does not necessarily reflect the views of CENJOWS. The author certifies that the article is original in content, unpublished and it has not been submitted for publication/ web upload elsewhere and that the facts and figures quoted are duly referenced, as needed and are believed to be correct.

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