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North Korea and Russia's dangerous partnership

The threat to global security from the Kim–Putin axis and how to respond

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Summary

- Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 catalysed an alarming mutual partnership between Russia and North Korea. While early bilateral ties between the two countries were heavily premised around a cash-for-weapons exchange, relations have escalated considerably in the past year to involve North Korea sending troops to Russia. Such actions show that the North Korea–Russia relationship has moved beyond the merely transactional to become a longer-term strategic and ideological partnership. As such, the nature of this relationship poses a significant threat to regional and global security.
- This research paper argues that the revival in North Korea–Russia relations is driven by four interlinked factors: a desire for the North Korean regime to gain food, financial and, crucially, military assistance from Russia (the extent of the latter remains, as yet, unknown); Russia's isolation and need for munitions to win the Ukraine war; a longer-term objective for North Korea to gain a great power partner to undermine international security institutions; and North Korea's ongoing desire to strengthen its domestic nuclear weapons and missile development, to serve Kim Jong Un's ultimate goal of regime survival.
- The international community now faces a worrying dual-pronged threat emanating from North Korea, given the significant acceleration in its development of nuclear weapons and delivery systems, North Korea's outright refusal to denuclearize, its lack of appetite for dialogue with the US and South Korea, and its intensifying economic and security cooperation with Russia. First, the potential for conflict in northeast Asia will increase, not least given North Korea's recent increase in belligerent behaviour towards South Korea. Second, the mutual relationship restricts the ability of international security institutions to constrain the illicit proliferation of weapons between the two countries.
- The renewed North Korea–Russia relationship has not escaped China's attention, especially since China has long been North Korea's most significant economic partner. Although it has so far been reluctant to take a clear position, China will be monitoring how the relationship develops, and, crucially, will also be watching the international response, particularly for any form of strengthening bilateralism and trilateralism between the US, Japan and South Korea, towards which China's opposition has grown in recent years.
- In response to these multiple, intertwined threats, the US and its allies and partners – particularly Japan and South Korea – must now prepare for where this dangerous partnership might go. In particular, they should take action to deter North Korea's provocations, including by:
 - **Increasing South Korean support for Ukraine.** Despite South Korea's reluctance to date to provide lethal aid to Ukraine, the direct involvement of North Korean troops in Russia's war means that South Korea's interests are now increasingly at stake. South Korea must therefore seriously consider the provision of military assistance to Ukraine.

- **Strengthening US-led efforts to deter a nuclear North Korea and reassure Japan and South Korea of support for their security interests.** The continuation of bilateral and trilateral military exercises between the three countries, coupled with high-level talks and information-sharing, is vital at a time when North Korea's nuclearization only looks set to increase.
- **Sustaining momentum in bilateral and trilateral relations between Japan, South Korea and China.** South Korea's recent proactive diplomacy towards Japan should offer a base from which to strengthen relations between these two states, given the potential consequences of the North Korea–Russia partnership for regional security. China remains a key partner of both North Korea and Russia, and has so far been unwilling to condemn North Korea's entry into the Ukraine war. But Seoul and Tokyo should not abandon efforts to engage in dialogue with Beijing.
- **Encouraging more robust engagement between South Korea and minilateral institutions in the Indo-Pacific region, together with European allies and partners.** In addition to bolstering its relationship with the US, South Korea should strengthen partnerships with regional forums such as the Quad and AUKUS, but also enhance its bilateral ties with European partners. For example, it should seek to build on the Downing Street Accord signed with the UK in November 2023.
- **Conducting a concerted campaign to increase information flows into North Korea.** Even given the low probability of regime change in North Korea, the US and its allies should recognize that the North Korea 'problem' is not limited to nuclear proliferation. In seeking to promote longer-term change in the attitudes of the North Korean people towards the Kim Jong Un regime, these countries should work with North Korean defector-led organizations in South Korea, the South Korean government and transnational non-governmental organizations to increase the flow of outside perspectives into the North.

Introduction

Russia's ongoing war in Ukraine has led to a concerning renewed partnership with North Korea. In accounting for this development, two narratives have dominated academic and policy-related discussions. The first narrative suggests that the burgeoning cooperation between North Korea and Russia is little more than a short-term, transactional relationship, contingent on the Ukraine war, for which North Korea has been providing Russia with artillery and other weapons. In contrast, the second account portrays relations between Moscow and Pyongyang as longer-term in nature, going beyond a mere cash-for-weapons exchange. Instead, this narrative suggests that the two states intend to develop a formal alliance, possibly also involving China, as part of a sustained ideological and strategic challenge to the US's leadership of the post-war international order.

Drawing on extensive interviews with current and former South Korean officials, together with recent high-level statements from North Korea, Russia and China, this research paper argues that the relationship between North Korea and Russia is more complex than suggested by either of those two narratives. While the foundations of the revived partnership between North Korea and Russia were predominantly transactional – and remained so in the early part of the Ukraine war – subsequent actions by both countries, especially after the first year of the war, reveal a longer-term relationship that is both strategic and ideological, particularly given Pyongyang's firm commitment to accelerating its missile and nuclear weapons programmes.

Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, relations between Russia and North Korea have evolved rapidly to the point that, in October 2024, NATO secretary-general Mark Rutte confirmed that North Korea had deployed troops to western Russia.¹ This deployment followed a 'comprehensive strategic partnership' treaty between the two states, signed by Russian president Vladimir Putin and North Korean supreme leader Kim Jong Un in June. This milestone treaty made clear that the two countries would not only assist each other in the event of any external aggression, but would strengthen cooperation in the military, technological and security domains.²

Russia's need for assistance in its war on Ukraine has allowed North Korea to leverage the situation for its own short-term advantage, in helping to satisfy Russia's immediate requirement for weapons – whether artillery or ballistic missiles – in return for food aid and financial assistance. Beyond the short term, however, North Korea is also likely to receive advanced technological and military assistance from Russia – the extent of which, concerningly, remains unknown – and has already gained Russia's unwavering support in the UN Security Council.

The mutual relationship also serves the wider purpose of both states in seeking to undermine and erode the institutions and legitimacy of the US-led international order. By leveraging Russia's permanent membership and veto power on the

¹ Dubois, L. and Miller, C. (2024), 'Nato says North Korean troops in Russia threaten European security', *Financial Times*, 28 October 2024, <https://www.ft.com/content/42da197b-e4f5-4e85-8720-5034bc599d13>.

² Smith, J. and Park, J.-M. (2024), 'Russia's Putin and North Korea's Kim sign mutual defence pact', Reuters, 19 June 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/putin-kim-agree-develop-strategic-fortress-relations-kcna-says-2024-06-18>.

UN Security Council, and by preventing the institution from devising – let alone enforcing – sanctions against them, the two countries can escape from the consequences of sanctions-violating activities, while also demonstrating a united ideological front against the US and its allies.

Other important factors, however, must also be considered with respect to the future trajectory of the relationship: namely, the domestic goals of North Korea's supreme leader, Kim Jong Un, and the role of China.

North Korea's cooperation with Russia is tethered to the fundamental domestic goal of the Kim Jong Un regime – its own long-term survival.

North Korea's cooperation with Russia is tethered to the fundamental domestic goal of the Kim Jong Un regime – its own long-term survival, central to which is the expanded pursuit of nuclear weapons and missile capabilities. As Kim Jong Un continues to accelerate North Korea's nuclear and missile development programmes, any possible technological support from Russia will allow his regime to enhance the scope and sophistication of these programmes. At the same time, Kim Jong Un will use the propaganda value of these advances to strengthen his regime's social and ideological control over North Korea's population. At present, Pyongyang has no desire to abandon its plans for the development of advanced missile and weaponized nuclear capabilities. Indeed, it only seeks to increase the quality and quantity of its nuclear weapons and delivery systems. Nevertheless, what makes North Korea's current nuclear development and security cooperation with Russia particularly concerning is that North Korea exhibits no appetite for engaging in dialogue with South Korea or the US, nor for any talks that seek denuclearization.

Meanwhile, China remains North Korea's largest trading partner, but has adopted a cautious approach to North Korea's turn towards Russia. China seeks to maintain its influence over the Korean peninsula, while also siding with Russia and North Korea in opposing the West's response to the Ukraine war. China's actual view on the deployment of North Korean troops to assist Putin's war effort remains unknown. Nevertheless, the burgeoning bilateral relationship between two of its close partners is likely to pose a significant challenge which China cannot simply ignore.

With so many unknown variables – not least the possibility of North Korea sending additional troops to fight in Russia's ongoing war with Ukraine – the increasingly entrenched nature of North Korea–Russia cooperation poses clear risks to regional and global stability. These risks include the prospect of North Korea procuring advanced military and missile technology from Russia, which it could use in any provocations directed against South Korea or even the US; and, more concerningly in the long term, a fundamental undermining of the UN as a core global security institution in the post-war international order.

The revival of the North Korea–Russia relationship

A series of interrelated motivations underpin the current resurgence in North Korean–Russian relations. First, Russia's worsening global isolation, as a result of its invasion of Ukraine, and its desire to win the Ukraine war, placed North Korea in an advantageous position of being able to fulfil Russia's immediate need for military assistance, particularly the need to replenish Russia's supply of artillery shells. Second, and related, Pyongyang has been able to obtain food, financial and military assistance from Moscow in return, the latter particularly in missile technology. Third, the Ukraine war provided a convenient opportunity for North Korea to join forces with Russia ideologically, allowing the Kim Jong Un regime to evade and undermine multilateral and unilateral sanctions and thwart any attempts by the UN Security Council to hold both regimes to account. Finally, material and financial support gained in return for providing artillery shells and missiles to Russia has allowed North Korea to accelerate the domestic development of its missile systems and nuclear weapons capability, thereby prolonging the status quo of the Kim regime and strengthening the prospects of its long-term survival.

North Korea's response to the Ukraine war

North Korea's initial response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine was limited to rhetorical support. Less than a week after the initial invasion on 24 February 2022, the North Korean foreign ministry blamed the 'hegemonic policy' of the US and the West as the 'root cause' of the war.³ It was thus hardly surprising that on 2 March, at an emergency special session of the UN General Assembly, North Korea joined Russia, Belarus, Eritrea and Syria in voting against UN Resolution ES-11/1, which condemned Russia's invasion of Ukraine and demanded a complete withdrawal of Russian forces.⁴

Over time, this rhetorical support was increasingly matched by concerted steps on the part of North Korea to align itself with Moscow. As several interviewees made clear, the extent of North Korea's support for Russia, and vice versa, has been greater than that following Russia's annexation of Crimea in February 2014.⁵ For instance, in May 2022, the North Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs decried the US as having instigated the war as part of a plan to 'plunge Russia into total ruin'.⁶ Soon after, in June, North Korea joined Russia and Syria as the only three UN member states to recognize the sovereignty of the so-called Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics in eastern Ukraine. Following the annexation of those territories by Russia in September 2022, North Korea became the only UN member state to accept the results of the sham referendums held in the territories, and deemed these territories to be 'components of Russia'.⁷

³ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of North Korea via KCNA Watch (2022), 'Answer of Spokesperson for Ministry of Foreign Affairs of DPRK', 28 February 2022, <https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/1646055083-689030505/answer-of-spokesperson-for-ministry-of-foreign-affairs-of-dprk>.

⁴ United Nations General Assembly Resolution ES-11/1, 11th Emergency Special Session, 2 March 2022.

⁵ Author interviews with senior South Korean officials, Seoul, July 2024.

⁶ Ri Pyong Jin (2022), 'Why is the U.S. Seeking to Prolong the Ukrainian Crisis?', Ministry of Foreign Affairs of North Korea via KCNA Watch, 3 May 2022, <https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/1651615598-670248895/why-is-the-u-s-seeking-to-prolong-the-ukrainian-crisis>.

⁷ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of North Korea via KCNA Watch (2022), 'Press Statement by Jo Chol Su, Director-General of International Organizations Department of Foreign Affairs of DPRK', press release, 4 October 2022, <https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/1664874267-567932547/press-statement-by-jo-chol-su-director-general-of-international-organizations-department-of-foreign-affairs-of-dprk>.

These early rhetorical affirmations of support were unsurprising, with North Korea maintaining its long-held position of regarding the US as a ‘hostile’ hegemon – a view also taken by China and Russia.⁸ Only weeks before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, China and Russia had declared how there were ‘no forbidden areas of cooperation’ in the two states’ ‘no limits partnership’, which involved a staunch opposition to US hegemony.⁹

From words to weapons

As early as August 2022, letters exchanged between Kim Jong Un and Vladimir Putin raised, for the first time, the possibility of cooperation between Moscow and Pyongyang escalating beyond rhetoric. In their exchange, the two leaders pledged to strengthen ‘strategic and tactical cooperation, support and solidarity’ in response to ‘the hostile forces’ military threat and provocation’, the latter of which referred to the US and its allies. Russia would be ‘ready to offer allies and partners the most modern types of weapons’, whether combat aircraft or drones.¹⁰ These pledges caught the attention of the US State Department, which revealed a month later that Russia was ‘in the process of purchasing millions of rockets and artillery shells from North Korea for use in Ukraine’.¹¹ With an increasingly apparent munitions shortage – owing in no small part to sanctions and export controls imposed by the European Union and the US, and supported by Japan, South Korea and Taiwan – Putin turned to North Korea as one of the few states willing to offer him any direct assistance.¹²

Although North Korea has previously taken part in illicit networks of horizontal weapons proliferation, these revelations of North Korean military and security cooperation with Russia – which the Kim regime at first expectedly denied¹³ – caused concern among the US and its allies.

The early foundations of cooperation following Putin’s invasion of Ukraine were built on a cash-for-weapons exchange. In return for supplying large quantities of 122-mm and 152-mm artillery for Russia to use in its war against Ukraine, North Korea would receive food, financial assistance and Russian military technology.¹⁴ While analysts were right to characterize the early part of the relationship as a ‘marriage

⁸ For one recent example, see Ministry of Foreign Affairs of North Korea via KCNA Watch (2024), ‘Press Statement by Vice-Minister for International Organizations of DPRK Foreign Ministry’, press release, 14 June 2024, <https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/1729508672-353269847/press-statement-by-vice-minister-for-international-organizations-of-dprk-foreign-ministry>.

⁹ Kremlin (2022), ‘Joint Statement of the Russian Federation and the People’s Republic of China on the International Relations Entering a New Era and the Global Sustainable Development’, press release, 4 February 2022, <http://en.kremlin.ru/supplement/5770>.

¹⁰ BBC News (2022), ‘Russia vows to expand relations with North Korea’, 15 August 2022, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-62462276>.

¹¹ US Department of State (2022), ‘Department Press Briefing – September 6, 2022’, press release, <https://www.state.gov/briefings/department-press-briefing-september-6-2022>; Schwartz, F. and Davies, C. (2022), ‘Russia buys millions of rockets and artillery shells from North Korea’, *Financial Times*, 6 September 2022, <https://www.ft.com/content/f614c922-b8ec-4f2b-bf74-a5b22b3fecc5>.

¹² European Commission (2024), ‘Sanctions adopted following Russia’s military aggression against Ukraine’, 11 July 2024, https://finance.ec.europa.eu/eu-and-world/sanctions-restrictive-measures/sanctions-adopted-following-russias-military-aggression-against-ukraine_en.

¹³ See, for example, Korean Central News Agency via KCNA Watch (2024), ‘Press Statement of Vice Department Director of C.C., WPK Kim Yo Jong’, press release, 17 May 2024, <https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/1715994270-174856724/press-statement-of-vice-department-director-of-c-c-wpk-kim-yo-jong>. In one example, it was revealed in 2004 that North Korea had been part of a clandestine network of horizontal nuclear proliferation led by the Pakistani nuclear physicist A.Q. Khan, which had also involved Iraq, Libya, Pakistan and Syria.

¹⁴ Cha, V. (2024), ‘A Threat Like No Other: Russia-North Korea Military Cooperation’, CSIS, 17 June 2024, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/threat-no-other-russia-north-korea-military-cooperation>.

of convenience’ – not least during the first year of the Ukraine war – this description quickly became outdated as both sides took increasingly significant steps to upgrade bilateral ties.¹⁵ Several interviewees for this paper made clear that, by mid-2024, the relationship was ‘both transactional and strategic’.¹⁶ Thus, to describe current relations as ‘merely transactional’ downplays the full extent of North Korea–Russia cooperation.¹⁷

The receipt of food and financial assistance fulfils North Korea’s immediate material needs, particularly given its poor economic performance in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Yet, even though the exact nature and quantity of the military technology provided from Moscow to Pyongyang remains unknown, this likely provision would be in line with two of North Korea’s longer-term goals.

First, the receipt of military technology – including intercontinental ballistic missile technology, satellite technology and submarine-based ballistic missile technology – assists Kim Jong Un’s pursuit of increasing the quality and quantity of the country’s conventional and unconventional weapons arsenals, in line with his earlier ambitions.¹⁸

Second, by bolstering military and technological cooperation with Russia, North Korea seeks to gain the unwavering support of a permanent member of the UN Security Council in the long term. Prior to the Ukraine war, both China and Russia assisted North Korea in evading sanctions, whether from the UN or from individual states such as the US. While such assistance continued even after the Ukraine war began, the development of more robust ties with Russia provided North Korea with clear strategic and ideological benefits. Strategically, Russia’s use of the veto power in the UN Security Council would allow any North Korean (and Russian) violations of multilateral sanctions, which China and Russia had previously supported – such as in 2016 and 2017 – to go unpunished.¹⁹ In so doing, Russia would reduce the Security Council to its most impotent position since the UN’s inception in 1945. By avoiding any consequences for its sanctions-violating behaviour, North Korea could continue to develop its nuclear weapons and missile programmes without repercussions. Moreover, any future sanctions-violating behaviour on the part of North Korea is likely to remain free from official UN condemnation, let alone sanctions, thereby only catalysing the development of North Korea’s nuclear and missile programmes.²⁰

The ideological component of the North Korea–Russia relationship also benefits both countries. The warming of relations between Kim and Putin has only accelerated the creation of a united front in undermining core global security institutions, not least the UN Security Council, with the two states’ opposition

¹⁵ Park, W. (2024), ‘North Korea’s Strategy for Leveraging North Korea-China-Russia Solidarity and Its Effects on Security on the Korean Peninsula’, *11th KRINS-Brookings Joint Conference 2024*, p. 131.

¹⁶ Author interviews with South Korean officials, Seoul, July 2024.

¹⁷ Author interview with South Korean foreign ministry official, Seoul, July 2024.

¹⁸ In addition to the aforementioned technology, Pyongyang seeks decoys, re-entry vehicles, nuclear-powered submarines and high-density lenses for espionage satellites. Author interview with senior South Korean security official, Seoul, July 2024.

¹⁹ These sanctions included UN Security Council resolutions 2270, 2321, 2371, 2375, and 2397, which, *inter alia*, placed stringent limitations on North Korean coal exports; crude oil imports; and imposed restrictions on North Korea’s Foreign Trade Bank. Of note, Resolution 2397 called for the return of all North Korean overseas workers within 24 months.

²⁰ This pattern of behaviour has been termed ‘strategic delinquency’. See, for example, Howell, E. (2023), *North Korea and the Global Nuclear Order: When Bad Behaviour Pays*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

to the West also being shared, at least in rhetoric, by China. Such solidarity was demonstrated in March 2024, when Russia surprisingly vetoed – and China abstained from voting on – a resolution calling for the extension of the mandate of the UN Panel of Experts responsible for monitoring North Korea's sanctions violations, leading to the panel's expiry.²¹ Indeed, China's abstention in this vote emphasizes how, akin to Russia, it remains eager to 'sabotage' institutions that it deems to go against its national interests, even to the considerable benefit of North Korea.²²

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Russia has benefited by being able to demonstrate a counter-response to the West's arming of Ukraine, the latter which North Korea recently decried as creating the conditions for a 'third world war'.²³ With Kim and Putin both emphasizing the need to build a 'multipolar world' order to combat the US's 'hostile' global hegemony – a claim backed by Chinese president Xi Jinping at the 2024 BRICS summit held in Russia – North Korea and Russia have underscored their common commitment to opposing the values that the West seeks to uphold.²⁴

From friendship to formal partnership

Throughout 2023 and 2024, the upgrade in relations between North Korea and Russia was symbolized by a notable increase in the frequency of high-level ministerial visits – across a range of sectors – between representatives of the two states (see Figure 1) compared to previous years. During this time, such rapprochement was most notably marked by two summits between Vladimir Putin and Kim Jong Un. In September 2023, the two leaders met at the Vostochny cosmodrome, a Russian spaceport in the Russian Far East. In his longest visit overseas since becoming supreme leader in December 2011, Kim Jong Un emphasized that North Korea viewed its ties with Russia as comprising 'everlasting strategic relations' between the two 'invincible comrades-in-arms'.²⁵

²¹ United Nations (2024), 'Security Council Fails to Extend Mandate for Expert Panel Assisting Sanctions Committee on Democratic People's Republic of Korea', SC/15648, 28 March 2024, <https://press.un.org/en/2024/sc15648.doc.htm>.

²² Author interview with South Korean officials, Seoul, July 2024.

²³ Korean Central News Agency via KCNA Watch (2024), 'Press Statement of Spokesman for DPRK Foreign Ministry', 18 August 2024, <https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/1724063560-565722196/press-statement-by-spokesman-for-dprk-ministry-of-foreign-affairs>.

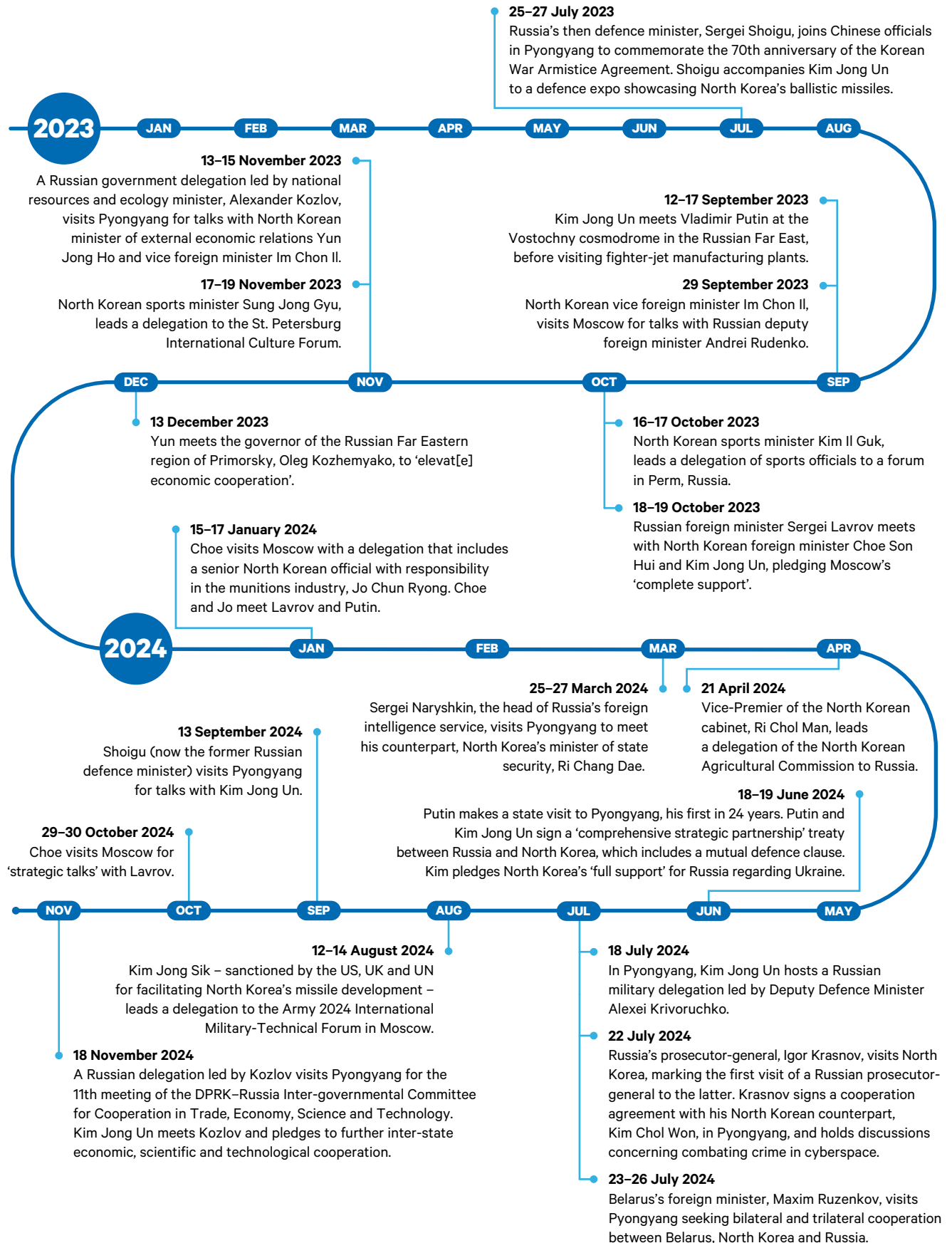
²⁴ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China (2024), 'Xi Jinping Attends the 16th BRICS Summit and Makes an Important Statement', 23 October 2024, https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/xw/zyxw/202410/t20241025_11516006.html; Korean Central News Agency via KCNA Watch (2024), 'Respected Comrade Kim Jong Un Has Talks with President Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin', 20 June 2024, <https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/1718858925-665919992/respected-comrade-kim-jong-un-has-talks-with-president-vladimir-vladimirovich-putin>.

²⁵ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of North Korea via KCNA Watch (2023), 'New Milestone for Development of DPRK-Russia Relations: Respected Comrade Kim Jong Un Has Historic Meeting with Comrade President Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin at Vostochny Spaceport', 14 September 2023, <https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/1694691226-545544136/new-milestone-for-development-of-dprk-russia-relations-respected-comrade-kim-jong-un-has-historic-meeting-with-comrade-president-vladimir-vladimirovich-putin-at-vostochny-spaceport>.

North Korea and Russia's dangerous partnership

The threat to global security from the Kim–Putin axis and how to respond

Figure 1. Timeline of North Korea–Russia ministerial meetings, 2023–24



While belligerent and bombastic rhetoric has been a recurrent feature of the North Korean regime's public statements, Kim Jong Un's claims following the first year of the Ukraine war should not be dismissed in their entirety. Russia's desire to extend its relationship with North Korea beyond its transactional origins was confirmed by the Kim–Putin summit on 18–19 June 2024, which marked the Russian president's first trip to North Korea in 24 years.

This visit was not merely an act of reciprocity. The signing of a 'comprehensive strategic partnership' treaty, which included a mutual defence clause, made this summit a notable juncture in the relationship between Pyongyang and Moscow, underscoring its intended longevity. In the treaty, each state committed to providing 'military and other' assistance to the other in the event of external aggression (Article 4). Meanwhile, Article 23 underscored how the treaty would 'remain in effect indefinitely'.²⁶ It was far from coincidental that both sides remained reluctant to specify the nature of such assistance, while enabling heightened subsequent cooperation. As one interviewee for this paper asserted, the likelihood of escalation in North Korea–Russia relations after the signing of the treaty should not be dismissed, particularly given the two states' desire to respond to Western countries strengthening their support for Ukraine: 'Why would North Korea have signed the treaty if it did not want to coordinate and cooperate with Russia, beyond mere transactions?'²⁷

Nevertheless, the fact that this renewed partnership between Pyongyang and Moscow grew out of necessity – namely the latter's need for munitions – should not be overlooked. Indeed, North Korea and Russia refer to their upgraded bilateral ties using differing terms, reflecting how the two states may not view the goals of their bilateral relations in the same way. While Kim Jong Un has termed North Korea's newfound relations with Russia an 'alliance' – a reference which, following the summit, has been disseminated widely across North Korean state media – Russia prefers the term 'partnership'.²⁸ As a South Korean official suggested, this intentional choice of terminology gives Russia a way to reduce its commitment to North Korea should it choose to do so.²⁹ Moreover, Ri Il-kyu, a former counsellor at the North Korean embassy in Cuba who recently defected to South Korea, asserted that Russia would quickly sever ties following the end of the Ukraine war.³⁰ While this possibility should not be discounted, what makes the current extent of mutual commitments particularly concerning is that even if relations between the two regimes lose their current intensity following the end of the Ukraine war, Russia looks unlikely to abandon North Korea entirely.³¹

²⁶ Korean Central News Agency via KCNA Watch (2024), '조선민주주의인민공화국과 로씨야연방사이의 포괄적인 전략적동반자관계에 관한 조약' [Treaty on the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between the Democratic People's Republic of Korea and the Russian Federation], 20 June 2024, <https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/1718858404>.

²⁷ Author interview, senior South Korean official, Seoul, July 2024.

²⁸ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of North Korea (2024), '경애하는 김정은 동지께서 로씨야연방 대통령 올라지미르 올라지미로비치 뽀쨌동지의 우리 나라 방문을 환영하여 성대한 연회를 마련하시었다' [Respected Comrade Kim Jong Un hosted a grand banquet to welcome the visit of Russian Federation President Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin to our country], 20 June 2024, http://www.vok.rep.kp/index.php/revo_de/getDetail/ikn240620007/ko; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of North Korea (2024), '조선민주주의인민공화국과 로씨야연방사이의 포괄적인 전략적동반자관계에 관한 조약'이 조인되었다 경애하는' [Treaty on the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between the Democratic People's Republic of Korea and the Russian Federation Signed], 20 June 2024, https://www.mfa.gov.kp/search?page_start=405.

²⁹ Author interview with senior South Korean official, Seoul, July 2024.

³⁰ Mackenzie, J. (2024), 'Kim Jong Un wants Trump back, elite defector tells BBC', BBC News, 2 August 2024, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c0jqjwdyl1ko>.

³¹ Cha, V. (2024), 'The New Russia-North Korea Security Alliance', CSIS, 20 June 2024, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/new-russia-north-korea-security-alliance>.

The China factor

Given China's past support for North Korea's sanctions-violating actions, the rapprochement between North Korea and Russia has raised questions as to China's response, since China ultimately remains North Korea's principal economic benefactor and largest trading partner. At the end of 2023, trade with China amounted to more than 98 per cent of North Korea's annual foreign trade. Despite its pivot to Russia, North Korea's economic dependence on China has not meaningfully reduced.³² Russia–China trade, particularly in dual-use technologies, has also continued, even in light of the renewed partnership between North Korea and Russia. As several interviewees for this paper suggested, however, although the three countries may share a common adversary in the US and US-led international order, relations between them are more accurately conceptualized as three separate sets of bilateral relations rather than any unified 'strategic triangle'. This configuration, however, may – and will likely – change in the future.

North Korea's diversification in military and economic cooperation, away from China, would certainly have not gone unnoticed in Beijing, not least considering Kim Jong Un's repeated claims that Russia is now North Korea's 'number one' foreign policy priority.³³ In public, however, the Chinese Communist Party has been reluctant to articulate its position on the issue. Even in the aftermath of the comprehensive strategic partnership treaty, the Chinese foreign ministry deemed North Korea–Russia military cooperation to be 'a matter between two sovereign states', while continuing to highlight its opposition to enforcing 'sanctions and pressure' on North Korea.³⁴ More recently, the Chinese foreign ministry has also denied any knowledge of the deployment of North Korean troops to Russia.³⁵

The fact that China continues to assist North Korea in evading multilateral sanctions emphasizes how China is ultimately seeking to keep North Korea 'at bay' without abandoning it completely.

China's hesitation over taking a public stance on North Korea–Russia cooperation emphasizes its predicament. On the one hand, it does not want North Korea to become too close to Russia. China does not wish to lose influence over its smaller neighbour for fear of instability on the Korean peninsula – particularly owing to North Korea's increasing nuclearization. On the other hand, Beijing's hesitation over criticizing both Pyongyang and Moscow indicates China's wish to maintain its 'strong glue' with the other two states in combating their 'common enemy'

³² Korea Trade-Investment Promotion Agency (2024), '년 북한의 대외무역 동향' [2023: Annual Trends in North Korea's Foreign Trade], Seoul: KOTRA.

³³ BBC News (2023), 'Putin says 'possibilities' for military co-operation after Kim talks', 13 September 2023, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/live/world-asia-66792589>.

³⁴ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China (2024), '2024年6月20日外交部发言人林剑主持例行记者会' [Press conference by Foreign Ministry Spokesperson, Lin Jian, 20 June 2024], 20 June 2024, https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/fyrbt_673021/202406/t20240620_11439108.shtml.

³⁵ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China (2024), 'Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Lin Jian's Regular Press Conference on October 30, 2024', 30 October 2024, https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/xw/fyrbt/lxjzh/202410/t20241030_11518515.html.

of the US and its allies of Japan and South Korea.³⁶ The fact that China continues to assist North Korea in evading multilateral sanctions, whether through facilitating illicit ship-to-ship imports of North Korean coal and port-to-port smuggling of oil, or by employing North Korean labourers and computer hackers, emphasizes how China is ultimately seeking to keep North Korea 'at bay' without abandoning it completely.³⁷

In this vein, one South Korean official raised the possibility that China might not be as dissatisfied with the North Korea–Russia partnership as many analysts have claimed. According to this perspective, the partnership between Moscow and Pyongyang could, in fact, strengthen Beijing's own position in northeast Asia. Given China's concern with its international reputation – a claim that can hardly be said of Russia or North Korea – Russia's newfound role as the region's 'bad cop' thereby frees China from engaging in any direct action against the US and its allies. Furthermore, reunification with Taiwan remains a far higher foreign policy priority for China under Xi Jinping than providing active support for North Korea.³⁸

How North Korea benefits

Beyond foreign relations, North Korea–Russia military cooperation will have profound consequences on two key domestic objectives pursued by the Kim Jong Un regime: first, increasing the quality and quantity of North Korean nuclear and missile capabilities; second, and related, reinforcing the regime's control over its population of just over 26 million people by boosting North Korea's self-perceived status as a 'full-fledged nuclear state'.³⁹ Even if the eventual end of the Ukraine war reduces Russia's need for North Korean artillery, missiles and troops, Pyongyang will look to capitalize on its resurrected relations with Moscow to strengthen its domestic nuclear weapons development. Questions remain as to whether the missiles tested by North Korea to date have contained technology directly supplied by Russia.

Yet Western countries are rightly concerned by recent tests that have demonstrated a noticeable improvement in the scope and sophistication of Pyongyang's capabilities, with North Korean missiles flying higher and remaining airborne for longer.⁴⁰ In 2022, North Korea launched over 90 ballistic and cruise missiles – more than in any other previous year.⁴¹ Two such launches were of the *Hwasong-17* intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) on 27 March and 18 November. These

³⁶ Author interview with South Korean officials, Seoul, July 2024.

³⁷ Author interview with South Korean foreign ministry official, Seoul, July 2024.

³⁸ Author interview with senior South Korean official, Seoul, July 2024.

³⁹ North Korean state media has referred to the DPRK in this way on numerous occasions. see, for instance, Pyongyang Times via KCNA Watch (2018), 'US urged to roll back its anti-DPRK policy to improve relations', 17 May 2018, <https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/1532001653-10164537/us-urged-to-roll-back-its-anti-dprk-policy-to-improve-relations>.

⁴⁰ For instance, see UK Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (2024), 'North Korea ballistic missile launches on 12 September 2024: FCDO Statement', 12 September 2024, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/north-korea-ballistic-missile-launches-on-12-september-2024-fcdo-statement>; US Department of State (2024), 'G7 Foreign Ministers' Statement on the Launch of an Intercontinental Ballistic Missile by the DPRK', 5 November 2024, <https://www.state.gov/g7-foreign-ministers-statement-on-the-launch-of-an-intercontinental-ballistic-missile-by-the-dprk-2>.

⁴¹ Mackenzie, J. (2023), 'North Korea: What we can expect from Kim Jong-un in 2023', BBC News, 3 January 2023, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-64123657>; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan (2023), 'Missile Launches by North Korea, Nov. 2022', <https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/100469370.pdf>.

missiles have an operational range of up to 15,000 kilometres and, therefore, could potentially reach the US mainland. Meanwhile, amid North Korea's ongoing cash-for-weapons exchange with Russia, Kim Jong Un accelerated the development of his nuclear programme by upgrading North Korea's nuclear doctrine. In September 2022, Kim passed a new law that lowered the threshold and widened the conditions under which North Korea would resort to using nuclear weapons. Under this new doctrine, nuclear weapons could be used in the event of a nuclear or non-nuclear attack by 'hostile forces' on 'the command-and-control system over the state nuclear forces'.⁴² The possibility of using nuclear weapons for offensive purposes was also mentioned for the first time.

As Putin's need for North Korean munitions has become increasingly urgent, North Korea has benefited not just from receiving financial and food assistance but also, most likely, Russian advanced missile and military technology. While the specific nature of cooperation on the latter remains unknown, the probable provision of military technology has provided a useful opportunity for Kim Jong Un to strengthen North Korea's nuclear development and self-perception as a nuclear state.

Taking advantage of the inability of international institutions to constrain its heightened nuclear and missile development, not least due to North Korea securing Russian support, the Kim regime refused numerous calls by the administration of US president Joe Biden for talks 'without preconditions', including in July 2023, after Pyongyang had conducted its second test of a solid-fuel *Hwasong-18* ICBM.⁴³ At that time, the missile had the longest flight time of any North Korean missile, completing 1,001 kilometres at a maximum altitude of 6,648 kilometres.⁴⁴ This capability was subsequently surpassed by a new, solid-fuel *Hwasong-19* ICBM, launched on 31 October. The *Hwasong-18* and *Hwasong-19* launches raised questions of Russian involvement, such as whether the missile had been supplied by Russia directly; created indigenously with technology transferred by Russia; or if North Korea had itself acquired missile technology illicitly, without the knowledge of the Kremlin.⁴⁵ Comparable speculation again arose in November 2023, after North Korea successfully launched a reconnaissance satellite following repeated failed attempts earlier that year.⁴⁶

In these specific cases, the likelihood that Russian technology was used is low, particularly as Kim had met Putin less than two months before the latter satellite launch. Nonetheless, the greater possibility of Russian expertise and technology being provided both now and in the future will have severe consequences for the security of the Korean peninsula and for the broader global nuclear non-proliferation regime. Upgraded relations between Pyongyang and Moscow mean that any North

⁴² Rodong Sinmun via KCNA Watch (2022), 'Law on DPRK's Policy on Nuclear Forces Promulgated', 10 September 2022, <https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/1662798022-713067733/law-on-dprks-policy-on-nuclear-forces-promulgated>.

⁴³ CBS (2023), 'Transcript: National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan on "Face the Nation,"', 16 July 2023, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/jake-sullivan-national-security-adviser-face-the-nation-transcript-07-16-2023>.

⁴⁴ Yonhap News (2023), 'N. Korea confirms test-firing of Hwasong-18 solid-fuel ICBM', 13 July 2023, <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/PYH20230713016500315>.

⁴⁵ Smith, J., Hunnicutt, T. and Brunnstorm, D. (2023), 'Latest North Korean missile sparks debate over possible Russian links', Reuters, 19 August 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/latest-north-korean-missile-sparks-new-debate-over-possible-russian-role-2023-08-18>.

⁴⁶ Choi, S-H. and Kim, C-R. (2023), 'North Korea claims it launched first spy satellite, promises more', Reuters, 22 November 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/north-korea-flags-plan-launch-satellite-rocket-between-nov-22-dec-1-japan-says-2023-11-20>.

Korean acquisition of information about Russian capabilities, which previously happened through illicit channels, will likely now take place with the Kremlin's active support. Although the specific technology that Russia intends to provide – or has already provided – to North Korea remains unknown, several interviewees for this paper concluded that North Korea actively seeks technology to perfect its second-strike capability.⁴⁷

Table 1. Progress on North Korea's five-year military plan since January 2021

Capability type	North Korean claims of successful test (or otherwise indicated if unknown)
Nuclear submarine	Announced in January 2021; 'tactical nuclear-attack submarine' launched 6 September 2023; commissioned 7 September 2023
Hypersonic glide vehicle	28 September 2021
15,000-km range intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM)	24 March 2022; 18 November 2022; 15 March 2023
Sea-based solid-fuel ICBM	Possibly revealed April 2022
Reconnaissance/combat drones	26 December 2022
Tactical nuclear weapons	Possibly revealed 24 March 2023
Sea-based 'nuclear strategic weapon'	Possibly revealed and tested 24 March 2023; 4–7 April 2023
Ground-based solid-fuel ICBM	13 April 2023
Remodelled medium submarine	Revealed 8 September 2023
Military reconnaissance satellite	21 November 2023
'Super-large' nuclear warheads	20 April 2024
'Multi-warhead' rocket	27 June 2024

Sources: Zwirko, C. (2023), 'North Korea makes headway on 5-year weapons wishlist as midpoint nears', NK Pro, 7 April 2023, <https://www.nknews.org/pro/north-korea-makes-headway-on-5-year-weapons-wishlist-as-halfway-mark-nears>; Korean Central News Agency via KCNA Watch (2024), 'DPRK Missile Administration's Announcement Super-large Warhead Power Test for Cruise Missile and Test Launch of New Anti-aircraft Missile Conducted', 20 April 2024, <https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/1713565953-805374712/dprk-missile-administrations-announcement-super-large-warhead-power-test-for-cruise-missile-and-test-launch-of-new-anti-aircraft-missile-conducted>; Korean Central News Agency via KCNA Watch (2024), 'DPRK Missile Administration Conducts Test of New Important Technology', 27 June 2024, <https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/1719439724-185456702/dprk-missile-administration-conducts-test-of-new-important-technology>.

The timing of North Korea's military cooperation with Russia has been convenient for the Kim regime, as it seeks to entrench its pursuit of expanded nuclear capabilities announced prior to the Ukraine war. In January 2021, at the 8th congress of the Workers' Party of Korea, Kim outlined his five-year military development plan. According to this plan, North Korea would acquire and develop new forms of conventional and unconventional technology by 2026, including, among others, tactical nuclear warheads, nuclear-powered submarines and underwater-launched

⁴⁷ Interviews with South Korean officials, Seoul, July 2024.

‘nuclear strategic weapons’.⁴⁸ Achieving these aims would satisfy the Kim regime’s foreign and domestic policy goals, by combating external ‘threats and challenges’ and strengthening the ‘ideological work’ of the party.⁴⁹ Since January 2021, North Korean state media has broadcast claims outlining the regime’s considerable progress in testing these new weapons systems (Table 1), even if the actual extent of such development remains ambiguous. For instance, it remains unclear as to whether the test of an ‘underwater nuclear attack drone’ capable of creating ‘radioactive tsunamis’ was the ‘sea-based nuclear strategic weapon’ to which Kim was referring in his five-year plan.⁵⁰ While pronouncements from North Korean media should be taken with scepticism, the expansion in the types of capabilities Pyongyang claims to have tested shows few signs of abating.

Kim has also attempted to use Russian support to bolster his regime’s domestic legitimacy and establish his legacy as North Korea’s third supreme leader. For instance, Russia’s decision to supply oil directly to North Korea, in clear violation of UN Security Council sanctions imposed in 2016 and 2017 – which Russia and China had supported – will only prolong the ruling regime in its current form. With this significant gain, the Kim regime can free up financial resources previously used to procure oil supplies through complex international smuggling networks to spend on expanding its conventional and unconventional weapons arsenals.⁵¹

Importantly, these recent developments have taken place amid an isolationist turn within North Korea, as the ruling regime has simultaneously shunned negotiations with the US and other Western countries, while pursuing increasingly stringent measures to control the North Korean people. Moreover, Pyongyang’s policy towards Seoul has become markedly more aggressive. A significant moment came in January 2024, when Kim Jong Un announced that his regime would abandon reunification of the Korean peninsula as a core objective. Breaking with the precedent established by his father, Kim Jong Il, and grandfather, Kim Il Sung, North Korea would now regard South Korea as its ‘primary foe’, rather than as part of a single but temporarily divided peninsula.⁵² Adopting this policy has allowed Kim to justify recent provocations towards South Korea, such as the sending of refuse- and excrement-filled balloons into South Korea and artillery fire from North Korea across the Northern Limit Line (the *de facto* maritime border between the two Koreas).

Of particular concern for Western countries, North Korea’s stronger relationship with Russia appears to have allowed Kim to adopt a more belligerent stance in regional affairs, bolstering North Korea’s vertical proliferation of nuclear and missile capabilities; strengthening domestic anti-Western sentiment; and prolonging the lifespan of the Kim regime in its current form.

⁴⁸ Korean Central News Agency via KCNA Watch (2021), ‘On Report Made by Supreme Leader Kim Jong Un at 8th Congress of WPK’, 9 January 2021, <https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/1610155111-665078257/on-report-made-by-supreme-leader-kim-jong-un-at-8th-congress-of-wpk>.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Korean Central News Agency (2023), ‘중요무기시험과 전략적목적의 발사훈련 진행’ [Important Weapons Tests and Strategic Purpose Launch Drills Conducted], 24 March 2023, <http://www.kcna.co.jp/calendar/2023/03/03-24/2023-0324-001.html>.

⁵¹ Byrne, J., Byrne, J., Terzi, I. and Karlovskiy, D. (2024), *Blood and Oil: Russian Oil Deliveries Follow North Korean Weapons Transfers*, London: Royal United Services Institute, 26 March 2024, <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/report-blood-and-oil-russian-oil-deliveries-follow-north-korean-weapons-transfers>.

⁵² Korean Central News Agency via KCNA Watch (2024), ‘Respected Comrade Kim Jong Un Makes Policy Speech at 10th Session of 14th SPA’, 16 January 2024, <https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/1705369092-194545332/respected-comrade-kim-jong-un-makes-policy-speech-at-10th-session-of-14th-spa>.

The threat to regional and global stability

The revived North Korea–Russia partnership has catalysed a ‘fundamental change’ in both the geopolitical landscape of northeast Asia and the broader international order.⁵³ In late October, speculation that North Korea would send troops to Russian-occupied territories of Ukraine – which had emerged following the signing of the comprehensive strategic partnership treaty in June 2024 – was confirmed, when the South Korean and Ukrainian intelligence services announced that more than 12,000 North Korean troops were to be deployed to Russia, initially in the Kursk region, where Ukrainian troops had made incursions from August 2024.⁵⁴ This North Korean deployment, in wanton violation of sanctions, only emphasized the rapidly growing extent of cooperation between Pyongyang and Moscow, even if the impact of North Korean personnel – whether front-line soldiers or weapons technicians – on Russia’s overall war strategy is likely to be minimal.⁵⁵

By undermining the UN Security Council as a central institution of global security, North Korea–Russia cooperation has facilitated an increase in the sanctions-violating activities on the part of both states, while the international community remains increasingly unable to compel North Korea to denuclearize.

Yet the threats posed by North Korea’s turn to Russia – to both regional and global security – are likely to extend beyond any future conclusion of the Ukraine war. By undermining the UN Security Council as a central institution of global security, North Korea–Russia cooperation has facilitated an increase in the sanctions-violating activities on the part of both states, while the international community remains increasingly unable to compel North Korea to denuclearize.

North Korea’s turn to Russia is of grave concern for policymakers both in northeast Asia and the West, since it amplifies the military threat emanating from the Kim Jong Un regime. First, Pyongyang continues to accelerate its vertical proliferation of nuclear weapons and delivery systems, with Kim Jong Un pledging to increase the size of his nuclear arsenal at an ‘exponential’ rate,⁵⁶ and to develop tactical nuclear

⁵³ Author interview with South Korean official, Seoul, July 2024.

⁵⁴ Clover, C. and Mosolava, D. (2024), ‘Vladimir Putin signals North Korean troops are in Russia’, *Financial Times*, 24 October 2024, <https://www.ft.com/content/89f35fd1-d883-412e-8912-af0c0376081e>.

⁵⁵ While UN Security Council Resolution 2397, adopted unanimously on 22 December 2017, called on North Korean workers abroad to be returned to the North Korea within 24 months, several thousand such workers remained in both China and Russia. See Ministry of Unification of Republic of Korea (2023), *2023 Report on North Korean Human Rights*, Seoul: Ministry of Unification, pp. 428–29; United Nations Security Council Resolution 2397, UN S/RES/2397 (2017), <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/n17/463/60/pdf/n1746360.pdf>; Choe Sang-hun (2023), ‘North Koreans Trapped in ‘State-Sponsored Slavery’ in Russia’, *New York Times*, 3 April 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/04/03/world/asia/north-korea-human-rights.html>.

⁵⁶ A visit by Kim Jong Un to an as-of-yet unseen uranium enrichment facility was publicized by North Korean state media. See, for example, Korean Central News Agency via KCNA Watch (2024), ‘Respected Comrade Kim Jong Un Inspects Nuclear Weapons Institute and Production Base for Weapon-grade Nuclear Materials’, 13 September 2024, <https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/1726184519-128578652/respected-comrade-kim-jong-un-inspects-nuclear-weapons-institute-and-production-base-for-weapon-grade-nuclear-materials>.

weapons to combat the ‘serious nuclear threat’ posed by the US.⁵⁷ Second, the unknown extent and duration of military cooperation with Russia has elevated the risk of North Korea acquiring new and advanced military and missile technologies, which it could potentially use to provoke South Korea and the US, both in the short and long term.

While North Korea is unlikely to use nuclear weapons in any conflict – for fear of the response, which would lead to the destruction of the Kim regime – it may, as in the past, pursue a policy of heightened brinkmanship, which will pose clear security challenges, most notably to Japan and South Korea. Even though North Korea’s past behaviour has exhibited a tendency to escalate provocations towards its adversaries of the US and South Korea during US election years, North Korea has significantly increased its belligerent behaviour towards the South in 2024.⁵⁸ For example, in August, Kim Jong Un announced that North Korea had deployed ‘tactical ballistic missile launchers’ to its front-line troops along the inter-Korean border.⁵⁹ A month later, Kim unveiled North Korea’s largest ever transporter-erector launch vehicle, designed to transport and launch surface-to-air and surface-to-surface missiles.⁶⁰ North Korean missile launches frequently land in waters between Japan and the Korean peninsula, while North Korea continues to carry out other acts of belligerence against its neighbours. For example, Pyongyang’s ongoing launches of balloons carrying excrement and refuse across the Korean border since May 2024 suggest that it has no intention of reining in its provocations.

The intensified cooperation between North Korea and Russia also elevates the risk for South Korea and its partners of being placed in an increasingly precarious position in their own foreign relations, in terms of both economic and military security. Even prior to the Ukraine war, Seoul has always striven to maintain its alliance with Washington without compromising its economic relations with Beijing and Moscow. Nevertheless, China’s ongoing economic coercion and push for ‘self-reliance’ has already led to South Korea seeking to ‘de-risk’ its trade, not least by diversifying imports away from China. For example, in December 2023, South Korean exports to the US exceeded those to China for the first time in nearly 20 years, in what could be seen, at least in part, as a reaction to China’s growing economic coercion.⁶¹

⁵⁷ Korean Central News Agency via KCNA Watch (2024), ‘Respected Comrade Kim Jong Un Makes Important Speech on National Day’, 10 September 2024, <https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/1725921493-659631310/respected-comrade-kim-jong-un-makes-important-speech-on-national-day>.

⁵⁸ Cha, V. (2020), ‘North Korean Provocations Likely Around U.S. Presidential Election’, CSIS Beyond Parallel, 23 September 2020, <https://beyondparallel.csis.org/dprk-provocations-likely-around-u-s-presidential-election>.

⁵⁹ Rodong Sinmun via KCNA Watch (2024), ‘Commissioning Ceremony of Ultimate Weaponry Demonstrating Sure Victory of Cause of Building Powerful Army Ceremony for Celebrating Transfer and Receiving of New-Type Tactical Ballistic Missile System Takes Place with Splendour’, 5 August 2024, <https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/1722863425-42759958/commissioning-ceremony-of-ultimate-weaponry-demonstrating-sure-victory-of-cause-of-building-powerful-army-ceremony-for-celebrating-transfer-and-receiving-of-new-type-tactical-ballistic-missile-system>.

⁶⁰ Korean Central News Agency via KCNA Watch (2024), ‘Respected Comrade Kim Jong Un Inspects Defence Industrial Enterprise’, 8 September 2024, <https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/1725748809-820562867/respected-comrade-kim-jong-un-inspects-defence-industrial-enterprise>; The Korea Times (2024), ‘N. Korea unveils new 12-axle transporter erector launcher’, 9 September 2024, https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2024/10/103_382195.html.

⁶¹ Davies, C. (2023), ‘US overtakes China as market for South Korean goods’, *Financial Times*, 22 June 2023, <https://www.ft.com/content/8073cd37-bbf1-46f0-ad31-43ef88283393>.

Thus, North Korea's burgeoning relationship with Russia has caused South Korea to align itself more concertedly with the US, raising the possibility of greater tensions over trade with China and Russia.⁶² This potential has not gone unnoticed by China. Indeed, at a trilateral meeting between China, Japan and South Korea in May 2024, Chinese premier Li Qiang warned South Korea not to 'turn economic and trade issues into political games or security matters'.⁶³

Policy recommendations

The new heights reached in bilateral relations between North Korea and Russia, as exemplified in their signing of the comprehensive strategic partnership treaty in June 2024, have been reflected in increasingly frequent ministerial visits between the two countries; the sending of North Korean troops to aid Russia's war effort; and a successful undermining of the UN Security Council, to the benefit of North Korea, Russia and China. In light of the concerning implications for regional and global security, this section of the paper proposes five policy recommendations aimed at assisting key stakeholders, including the US, Japan and South Korea, to address the growing threat posed by these developments.

Increase South Korean support for Ukraine

South Korea has hitherto been reluctant to provide lethal assistance directly to Ukraine, not least to avoid jeopardizing its economic ties with Russia. Yet, as then South Korean national security adviser Chang Ho-jin made clear in June 2024, Russia's signing of the comprehensive strategic partnership treaty marked the crossing of a 'red line'.⁶⁴ With North Korea providing not just artillery shells, ballistic missiles, but also troops to aid Russia's war effort in Ukraine, South Korea must follow through on its rhetoric and consider providing military assistance to Ukraine in the short term. Such assistance can comprise defensive forms of lethal aid, such as air defence systems, as well as the deployment of South Korean military officials to monitor the strategies and postures of their North Korean counterparts. In the longer term, South Korea should also contribute to Ukraine's post-war reconstruction efforts, for which it could draw on its own experience of recovery following the Korean War. While South Korea must remain vigilant of the risk that North Korea will view any such provision of aid – not least lethal aid – as an escalation in tensions, the deployment of North Korean troops has only emphasized how South Korea's interests are now directly involved in the Ukraine war.

⁶² In May 2024, a month before the North Korea–Russia 'comprehensive strategic partnership' treaty was signed, South Korean president Yoon Suk Yeol controversially stated that South Korea would 'manage relations with Russia as amicably as possible' and 'on a case-by-case basis'. See Kim, J. and Park, J.-H. (2024), 'Seoul to pursue amicable ties with Moscow despite North Korean arms trade: Yoon', NKNews, 9 May 2024, <https://www.nknews.org/2024/05/seoul-to-pursue-amicable-ties-with-moscow-despite-north-korean-arms-trade-yoon>.

⁶³ Xinhua (2024), 'Chinese premier says China, Japan, S. Korea should regard each other as partners, development opportunities', 27 May 2024, <https://english.news.cn/20240527/36c1a5da887e4c399feac637d320a734/c.html>.

⁶⁴ Song, J. (2024), 'South Korea to consider supplying arms to Ukraine after Putin–Kim pact', *Financial Times*, 21 June 2024, <https://www.ft.com/content/34439f7d-e546-40eb-92e5-54aa0224ecbe>.

Strengthen US-led efforts to deter a nuclear North Korea and reassure Japan and South Korea of support for their security interests

However differently they interpreted the North Korea–Russia relationship, interviewees for this paper all stressed the importance of strengthening bilateral and trilateral security cooperation between the US, Japan and South Korea in response. Although the outgoing Biden administration did little to reduce North Korea's belligerence, it sought to reassure its allies in Japan and South Korea through the Washington Declaration of April 2023, and the trilateral Camp David Summit in August that year. With the possibility – albeit low – of the US weakening its extended deterrence over the Korean peninsula causing a concern among policymakers in Washington and Seoul, the incoming US administration should seek to reassure and engage its allies via two principal pathways:⁶⁵

- First, by continuing bilateral and trilateral military exercises involving the US, Japan and South Korea – such as the 'Freedom Edge' drills of June 2024 – as a sign of resolve. Moreover, the three countries should also maintain their participation in larger drills, such as the biennial Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC) exercise held by the US Indo-Pacific Command.⁶⁶
- Second, using the existing '2+2' and three-way high-level talks involving the US, Japan and South Korea. These talks are vital to bolster information-sharing mechanisms with respect to tracking and anticipating North Korean missile launches, which are likely to increase in frequency.⁶⁷ Through these talks, Japan and South Korea will be afforded greater involvement in combating the North Korean nuclear threat. The first-ever meeting between the defence chiefs of the US, Japan and South Korea, in July 2024, offered a useful starting point for such cooperation by institutionalizing the Trilateral Security Cooperation Framework and committing all parties to addressing the North Korea–Russia partnership.⁶⁸ Furthermore, the US and South Korea should quickly implement the goals of the Nuclear Consultative Group, created as part of the April 2023 US–South Korea Washington Declaration, particularly by deploying US strategic assets on and around the Korean peninsula as a way of bolstering an integrated system of deterrence against North Korea.⁶⁹

⁶⁵ Cha, V. (2024), 'America's Asian Partners Are Not Worried Enough About Trump', *Foreign Affairs*, 26 June 2024, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/americas-asian-partners-are-not-worried-enough-about-trump>.

⁶⁶ Interviews with former and current South Korean officials, Seoul, July 2024.

⁶⁷ For example, see US Department of State (2024), 'Joint Statement of the Security Consultative Committee ("2+2")', press release, 28 July 2024, <https://www.state.gov/joint-statement-of-the-security-consultative-committee-22-2>.

⁶⁸ US Department of Defense (2024), 'Japan-United States-Republic of Korea Trilateral Ministerial Joint Press Statement', press release, 27 July 2024, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3852146/japan-united-states-republic-of-korea-trilateral-ministerial-joint-press-statem>.

⁶⁹ Interviews with former and current South Korean officials, Seoul, July 2024.

Sustain momentum in bilateral and trilateral relations between Japan, South Korea and China

South Korea's historically frosty bilateral relations with Japan have hindered cooperation against regional threats. South Korea's recent proactive foreign policy towards Japan, featuring regular high-level dialogue, should continue given the urgency of the response to North Korea's renewed cooperation with Russia. With newly elected Japanese prime minister Shigeru Ishiba going as far as to call for the establishment of an 'Asian NATO' to combat regional security threats, the recent momentum in bilateral ties between Japan and South Korea must be sustained.⁷⁰ Strengthening existing mechanisms for intelligence-sharing, such as those outlined in the General Security of Military Information Agreement, which entered into force in March 2023, is one example of how this aim could be achieved.

Sustained cooperation between Japan and South Korea might offer one possible way, albeit difficult, for engaging with China, in order to 'draw a wedge' in the North Korea–Russia relationship – particularly if China's dissatisfaction with North Korea's pivot to Russia grows.⁷¹ China – together with North Korea and Russia – continues to deride the US's strengthening relations with Japan and South Korea as 'an effort to create a northeast Asian version of NATO'. Indeed, in response to these strengthening defensive alliances, Beijing believes that such bilateralism and trilateralism will form a coalition against China's own interests. China, however, is no benign actor. At the same time as it voices its dissatisfaction at the relationship between Washington, Tokyo and Seoul, Beijing continues to assist Pyongyang in evading multilateral and unilateral sanctions.⁷² At the same time, however, regular ministerial meetings between China, Japan and South Korea, such as that in June and July this year, offer a starting point towards achieving a consensus between those countries on their response to the intensifying North Korea–Russia relationship, even if any such consensus remains elusive.⁷³

Encourage more robust engagement between South Korea and existing minilateral institutions in the region, as well as with European allies and partners

In addition to strengthening its alliance with the US, South Korea should reinforce security- and defence-related engagement with like-minded partners and institutions elsewhere, not least if South Korea is to become a 'global pivotal state'.⁷⁴ Given the possible consequences of North Korea–Russia cooperation on international security,

⁷⁰ Ishiba, S. (2024), 'Shigeru Ishiba on Japan's New Security Era: The Future of Japan's Foreign Policy', Hudson Institute, 25 September 2024, <https://www.hudson.org/politics-government/shigeru-ishiba-japans-new-security-era-future-japans-foreign-policy>.

⁷¹ Author interview with South Korean official, Seoul, July 2024.

⁷² Ibid. In February 2024, the North Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs deemed such informal institutions to be disruptive to 'regional peace and security'. See Ministry of Foreign Affairs of North Korea via KCNA Watch (2024), 'US Indo-Pacific strategy is geopolitical confrontation scenario disturbing regional peace and stability', 19 February 2024, <https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/1708337430-507978237/us-indo-pacific-strategy-is-geopolitical-confrontation-scenario-disturbing-regional-peace-and-stability>.

⁷³ Reuters (2024), 'South Korea to hold first talks with China on Tues', 17 June 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/south-korea-hold-first-round-talks-with-china-tues-2024-06-17>; Kim, H. (2024), 'Vice FM's of S. Korea, China hold 1st strategic talks in over 2 yrs', Yonhap, 24 July 2024, <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20240724004100315?input=tw>.

⁷⁴ Howell, E. (2023), 'Securitization during crises: the Korean Peninsula and the East Asian regional order', *Korea Europe Review*, 5, <https://doi.org/10.48770/ker.2023.no5.28>.

South Korea should consider its participation in regional minilateral forums and bolster bilateral security ties with European partners, including the UK. In particular, South Korea should revisit the possibility of joining pillar II of the AUKUS security partnership and/or the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) to institutionalize its existing bilateral partnerships with member states.

While the likelihood of South Korea joining these forums as a formal member remains low, it should maintain robust bilateral relations with existing individual member states and consider engaging with the institutions themselves, albeit not as a full-fledged member.⁷⁵ In just one example, Seoul's recent increased engagement with NATO, without being a formal member of the organization, has underscored South Korea's growing importance as a contributor to, and provider of, global security.

With North Korea's missile and nuclear proliferation threatening to destabilize the Korean peninsula and northeast Asia, the strengthening of regional security has formed an essential component of the Indo-Pacific strategies of many states, not least those in Europe. To this end, European countries should uphold their current sanctions regime against North Korea. Importantly, South Korea is not just an economic partner for these states, but also a vital security partner. Here, the UK could play a key role in assisting South Korea as a core security partner, as outlined in the Downing Street Accord signed in November 2023.⁷⁶ In the short term, the UK should bolster its involvement in military defence exercises around the Korean peninsula, as in September 2024, when the UK Commando Force participated in the joint *Ssang Yong* US–South Korea military drills. The UK should also continue to monitor and support the imposition of sanctions against North Korea, which has become an increasingly urgent task given the demise of the UN Panel of Experts and North Korea's continued sanctions violations amid its heightened cooperation with Russia.

Conduct a concerted campaign to increase information flows into North Korea

The threat emanating from North Korea goes beyond its expanding nuclear weapons and missile programmes and its cooperation with Russia. With the Kim regime continuing to violate the human rights of North Korea's population, Western states should recognize the multifaceted nature of the North Korea 'problem'. As such, South Korea, together with its allies, partners and non-governmental organizations, should continue to support campaigns to send outside information into North Korea – for example, via radio broadcasts and supporting the activities of North Korean defector-led organizations in South Korea. The possibility of longer-term change in the attitudes of the North Korean people towards the Kim regime – however improbable in the short term – is a goal that must not be abandoned, even if the prospect of North Korean denuclearization remains distant.

⁷⁵ Jackson, L. (2024), 'South Korea discusses joining part of AUKUS pact with US, UK and Australia', Reuters, 1 May 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/south-korea-confirms-talks-aucus-pact-with-us-uk-australia-2024-05-01>.

⁷⁶ O'Sullivan, O. and Maddox, B. (2024), *Three foreign policy priorities for the next UK government: A case for realistic ambition*, Research Paper, London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, <https://doi.org/10.55317/9781784136062>.

Conclusion

This research paper has traced the evolution of relations between North Korea and Russia since the latter's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. While these ties were initially transactional in nature, subsequent actions taken by both North Korea and Russia have created a concerning longer-term relationship that is both strategic and, to a lesser extent, ideological. The rapid development of relations from a simple cash-for-weapons exchange into a formal treaty on comprehensive strategic cooperation should serve as a wake-up call for the US and its partners in northeast Asia, who must now prepare for where this dangerous partnership between Kim and Putin might go next.

The future trajectory of North Korea–Russia relations will likely depend on two main factors. The first of these factors pertains to the Ukraine war, and whether Russia decides in the short to medium term to develop munitions domestically, instead of relying on imports from North Korea. The second – and potentially more significant – factor is the response from China. North Korea's increasingly active involvement in the Ukraine war is likely to have caused some unease in China, both regarding the rapprochement between Kim Jong Un and Putin and the enhanced bilateral and trilateral cooperation between the US, Japan and South Korea in response to the former. Yet at the same time, China, North Korea and Russia share a common objective in opposing the US and the current US-led international order.

Even if current North Korea–Russia–China relations are more accurately seen as three sets of separate bilateral ties, the prospect of increasingly robust and entrenched coordination between these states cannot – and should not – be discounted. With North Korea now a nuclear-armed state in all but name, the future emergence of a 'strategic triangle' between Russia, China and a North Korea with increasingly robust nuclear capabilities must be taken seriously.

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Cover image: Crowds greet a motorcade carrying North Korean supreme leader Kim Jong Un and Russian president Vladimir Putin in Pyongyang, 19 June 2024.

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