

## Acceptance regardless of the costs: China's stance on the Russia–North Korea alliance

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The increasingly intensive cooperation between Russia and North Korea since September 2023 poses a significant threat to the US-led security system in East Asia. By fostering this partnership, Moscow is creating a new axis of international tension intended to increase the costs for the West of supporting Kyiv following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Pyongyang, for its part, is driven by the need to shore up its regime amid intensifying sanctions and pressure from renewed US alliances in the region.

The rapprochement between Russia and North Korea also presents several challenges for China. Despite having the means to halt or constrain this process, Beijing has refrained from taking visible action to do so. This is because a deepening of relations between Moscow and Pyongyang is required at this time due to the need of victory against the West for the Beijing-friendly authoritarian and anti-Western regime in Russia. In the Chinese leadership's broader strategic calculations, the overall assessment of the Russia–North Korea rapprochement, despite it not being devoid of significant risks, remains favourable in the current international situation. North Korea provides the Kremlin with assistance which China cannot offer without risking an open confrontation with the United States.

### A renewed Russia–North Korea alliance

The Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) politically supported the Russian Federation in its invasion of Ukraine as early as July 2022 by recognising the separatist republics in Donetsk and Luhansk. In return, Moscow likely provided Pyongyang with food and oil. In September 2023, Kim Jong Un visited Russia and met with Vladimir Putin at the Vostochny Cosmodrome. Following this meeting, barter between the two countries increased further. North Korea supplied ammunition and rockets to Russia, and North Korean factories reportedly began producing uniforms for the Russian army. In exchange, North Korea received additional food and oil. Moreover, it is likely that a transfer of missile and space technology also occurred, as in December 2023 Pyongyang conducted its first test of a solid-fuel intercontinental ballistic missile and in February 2024 it successfully launched a satellite into Earth's orbit for the first time. Although Pyongyang has been pursuing an advanced missile program for many years, prior to its collaboration with Moscow, it struggled with issues such as successfully placing satellites into orbit and stabilising the flight of ballistic missiles.



On 18–19 June 2024, Vladimir Putin visited the North Korean capital, where the two countries signed a treaty on a comprehensive strategic partnership which includes provisions regarding military assistance in the event of a war.<sup>1</sup> The agreement also outlines extensive cooperation across multiple sectors, including food, energy, technology and defence. In October, reports emerged confirming the presence of several thousand North Korean soldiers on the front line in Russia's Kursk Oblast, serving in Russian uniforms.

The cooperation benefits both sides. Russia has opened a new front in its rivalry with the United States and received tangible military support, mainly in the form of ammunition. Meanwhile, North Korea has received funds, oil and technology transfers, and its soldiers have gained valuable battlefield experience. In addition, Moscow has blocked all sanctions against Pyongyang in the United Nations.

### Beijing faces some risks...

In the medium- and long-term, the rapprochement between Russia and North Korea carries several potentially dangerous consequences for the People's Republic of China (PRC). These can be summarised in three key points.

Firstly, it reinforces the assertion, which is increasingly widespread in the West, about the ongoing formalisation of an effective Russian-Chinese alliance, with North Korea serving as its keystone. This situation mirrors the pre-World War I dynamic, when Paris was simultaneously an ally of both London and St. Petersburg, despite the absence of a formal treaty binding Britain and Tsarist Russia before the conflict broke out. This perception will likely strengthen the US-led system of anti-China alliances in East Asia, particularly the partnership between the United States, South Korea and Japan. Moreover, linking tensions on the Korean Peninsula with the war in Europe broadens the scope for coordinated actions between NATO and its Indo-Pacific partners.

Secondly, there are concerns that the agreement between Moscow and Pyongyang may include support for North Korea's nuclear capabilities, particularly through assistance in developing missile delivery systems, warhead construction and miniaturisation

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technology. This would inevitably accelerate the arms race in the region and could provoke Tokyo or Seoul to build their own nuclear arsenals. This could eliminate Beijing's strategic advantage over these countries.

Thirdly, the risk of destabilisation on the Korean Peninsula is increasing. This stems from China's reduced influence over North Korea and, consequently, Moscow's growing material support for Pyongyang, which in turn reduces North Korea's dependence on China. Since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, Chinese leaders have viewed North Korea as a buffer state against US-backed South Korea. Losing control of North Korea's unpredictable leadership increases the risk that the PRC could be dragged into a conflict with Washington when China may not be prepared.

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<sup>1</sup> See W. Rodkiewicz, 'Russia signs a military alliance with North Korea', OSW, 20 June 2024, [osw.waw.pl](https://osw.waw.pl).

## ...and hidden benefits

The aforementioned risks are real and acknowledged in China. However, from Beijing's perspective, they either represent objective realities beyond its direct control or are partially offset by the benefits of the rapprochement between Pyongyang and Moscow.

Firstly, for China, the survival of authoritarian, anti-Western regimes in both Russia and North Korea is an absolute priority. The strengthening of ties between these two Chinese allies mutually enhances their position. This is achieved at a relatively low material cost for Beijing and without immediate negative political consequences. Moreover, the growing cooperation between the United States, Japan and South Korea appears to be less significant for Beijing. China's perception among Western politicians and societies has been steadily deteriorating for many years, and it seems that the current leaders of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) have lost interest in remedying this situation. They view the consolidation of anti-China alliances in the region as a US-driven process, one that is progressing independently of China's actions or intentions and, in this case, not influenced by the growing cooperation between Moscow and Pyongyang.

Secondly, ammunition shipments from North Korea, which support Russia's war effort, relieve Beijing of the need to engage in direct military supplies to Moscow in the short- and medium-term. At the

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same time, Russian food supplies help to boost the stability of the North Korean regime, while the likely transfer of missile technology could enhance Pyongyang's deterrence capabilities and increase the costs of the US military presence on the Korean Peninsula. The PRC's leaders may also assume that the United States itself does not wish its allies to acquire weapons of mass destruction, as this could reduce Washington's influence over them.

Thirdly, while the Chinese leadership must accept both the autonomy of its partners and their attempts to expand it through mutual cooperation, North Korea's economic dependence on China remains so significant that the regime cannot survive without that support. Russia lacks the resources to effectively replace China in this role. Relations between China and North Korea have never been easy. Kim Jong Un began his rule by carrying out purges against members of the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK) suspected of having links to China. For many years, Pyongyang has pursued the development of its nuclear arsenal not only to 'defend' itself against South Korea and the United States but also to safeguard against a potential 'brotherly intervention' from Beijing. Nevertheless, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leadership is confident that, despite his aggressive rhetoric, Kim Jong Un would not provoke a confrontation with the United States without China's approval and support. This assumption is based on the conviction that his actions are primarily driven by the need to protect his regime. Various types of weapons of mass destruction have been already part of North Korea's arsenal for decades, playing an important role in its deterrence strategy.

Furthermore, Russia's cooperation with North Korea allows China to continue avoiding direct involvement in supporting Russia's war effort in Ukraine, thereby appearing to remain neutral in the conflict. Pyongyang provides Moscow with military aid in the form of equipment and personnel which Beijing cannot provide without risking an open confrontation with the West. This approach enables China to keep channels of communication with Europe open. The states of the Global South are an important target for this policy. It seems that they accept China's narrative, and their support represents an important asset for Beijing in its rivalry with the United States.

## Beijing's weakness or strength?

The analysis of the potential problems for China which could result from the growing cooperation between Russia and North Korea, prompts the question as to why Beijing has not acted to limit this process. Russia's economic and political dependence on China, though different from North Korea's, is currently so significant that this cooperation would likely be scaled back if Xi Jinping explicitly demanded that from Vladimir Putin. Xi certainly had opportunities to do so. In May 2024, a month before his trip to Pyongyang, Putin visited Beijing. It seems unlikely that during their discussions, Putin withheld his plans for a strategic alliance with Kim Jong Un from Xi Jinping. In addition, the two leaders met again in October at the BRICS summit in Kazan, where they held intensive consultations. By that point, Xi must have been aware of how far Russian-North Korean cooperation had advanced. Despite this, there has been no sign of any cooling in relations between Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin. On the contrary, China's political, economic and material support for Russia continues to grow.

Alongside this, relations between Beijing and Pyongyang have remained cool for many years, including due to the North Korean leadership's consistent assertion that their state's policy is independent. Therefore, tensions

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between China and North Korea should not be directly attributed to the recent alliance between Pyongyang and Moscow. These frictions appear to stem primarily from the awareness of Beijing's overwhelming dominance in their bilateral relationship, as China accounts for 90% of North Korea's foreign trade. For both Moscow and Pyongyang, cutting off Chinese support would be an absolute last resort, as it could entail the collapse of two regimes which, despite the current tensions, are ideologically aligned with Beijing and strategically significant for China. It seems that Kim Jong Un and Putin are also aware that without China they cannot successfully confront the West. At the same time, China's economic influence over both countries is so substantial that their pursuit of greater autonomy does not jeopardise the CCP leadership's relative peace of mind. All three states – China, Russia and North Korea – also share the conviction that they are compelled to cooperate in the face of what they perceive as a common threat from the United States and its allies.

While the relative increase in Pyongyang's independence may not be welcomed by Beijing, it does not alter the dynamics of the situation. The PRC's leaders believe that attempting to reverse this trend would be costly and fraught with even greater risks, such as the potential collapse of one of the allied regimes. As a consequence, they regard the overall assessment of Russia–North Korea cooperation as not necessarily optimal but still beneficial in the current international situation, which is dominated by the growing rivalry between China and the United States.

## The rivalry with Washington above all

This calculation does not prevent China from attempting to leverage the promise of restraining or limiting nuclear technology transfers from Russia to North Korea to gain economic or political concessions from the United States. Such promises could also be used to undermine the unity between Washington and its partners in Europe and Asia. The actual occurrence or scale of any such transfers is irrelevant if Beijing is to come up with this a proposal. This is because this move would represent nothing more than an empty promise.

Beijing's acceptance of the expanding Russia–North Korea ties seems to have its limits. The PRC's leaders are likely to only be willing to tolerate the Kim regime's growing autonomy resulting from its cooperation with the Kremlin to a certain degree. Beyond that threshold, Beijing could risk losing its influence over Pyongyang's strategic decisions. Such a scenario would involve the current or future leadership of the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK) pursuing independent negotiations with the United States, potentially securing recognition of the regime, and obtaining security guarantees and substantial economic assistance in exchange for disarmament and reducing cooperation with China. However, due to Pyongyang's profound distrust of Washington, this scenario should currently be viewed as unlikely.

For Beijing, maintaining control of the trajectory of its rivalry with the West is of paramount importance. Although the CCP leaders expect and are preparing for the possibility of an open confrontation with the United States and its allies in the future, they intend to make that confrontation happen at a time and place best suited to China. On the one hand, they believe that an effective alliance with Moscow will strengthen China's position in the event of a war,<sup>2</sup> but on the other hand, they cannot allow Putin's Russia to drag China into an open conflict with the West before Beijing deems it necessary. However, the Kremlin may provoke a war with NATO in Europe or with the United States in the Far East without China's consent, especially if Russia feels threatened. Therefore, from Beijing's perspective, Russia's relative strengthening resulting from its cooperation with North Korea minimises the risk that Moscow could take desperate actions on its own.

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<sup>2</sup> See M. Bogusz, J. Jakóbcowski, W. Rodkiewicz, *The Beijing–Moscow axis. The foundations of an asymmetric alliance*, OSW, Warsaw 2021, [osw.waw.pl](http://osw.waw.pl).