



North Korea Strengthens Cooperation with Russia

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Kim Jong Un's visit to Russia from 12 to 17 September was the North Korean leader's longest foreign trip since he took power in 2011 and the first since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Meetings with Russian government officials, including Vladimir Putin, confirm the deepening of bilateral relations following the launch of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine. While the visit was primarily of political-propaganda significance, it could mean closer military cooperation between North Korea and Russia. This would increase Russia's ability to continue the war in Ukraine and the risk of destabilisation in East Asia.

North Korea closed its borders in January 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This translated into a drastic reduction in international contacts, including Kim Jong Un's already low foreign activity. His tour of the Russian Far East and the visits of Chinese and Russian delegations to North Korea in recent months are the first signs of North Korea's post-pandemic diplomatic opening. They show that Russia is becoming, alongside China, North Korea's leading foreign partner.

Development of North Korea's Political Dialogue with Russia. Following the Russian attack on Ukraine in February 2022, [North Korea was ready to strengthen political contacts with Russia](#). In July this year, Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu visited Pyongyang. He took part in celebrating the 70th anniversary of the Korean War armistice agreement. Accompanied by Kim, he also saw an exhibition of North Korean military equipment. The Russian delegation (headed by Li Hongzhong of the Chinese Communist Party Politburo) to be allowed into North Korea since 2020. North Korea has also contacted Russia in response to the strengthening of U.S. trilateral cooperation with Japan and South Korea in recent months, as demonstrated by the [Camp David summit](#) in August.

The most politically significant event during Kim's visit to the Russian Far East was his meeting with Putin at the Vostochny Cosmodrome. The North Korean leader also visited factories producing, among other things, Su-35 and Su-57 fighter jets

in Komsomolsk-on-Amur. In Vladivostok, in turn, Kim met with Shoigu, who showed the North Korean delegation military equipment, including Tu-160, Tu-95, and Tu-22M3 strategic bombers and MiG-31 fighters equipped with Kinzhal hypersonic missiles, as well as the *Marshal Shaposhnikov* frigate, which is part of Russia's Pacific Fleet and equipped with Kalibr cruise missiles.

Manifestations and Potential for Cooperation. In the political sphere, the positions of the representatives of both sides expressed during the visit reflect the basis of cooperation between Russia and North Korea, including mainly opposition to the policies of the U.S. and its allies. North Korea reaffirmed [its unequivocal support for Russian aggression against Ukraine](#). Russia, in turn, [once again](#) undermined the sanctions policy imposed on North Korea—publicly handing over several combat and surveillance drones to the North Korean delegation violated the 2017 UN Security Council Resolution 2397, which Russia supported. Putin also asserted his country's readiness to support the development of North Korea's space programme, linked to its intercontinental missile programme. Because Russia consented to further [developing North Korean nuclear and missile capabilities](#), the North has propagandistically given bilateral relations "top priority" in its foreign policy. Political rapprochement is to be served by further visits. Putin has accepted Kim's invitation to visit Pyongyang (he has been there once, in July 2000), but without specifying a date.

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Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, meanwhile, is due to travel to the North Korean capital in October.

In military terms, North Korea and Russia have not officially concluded any agreements. However, the composition of the delegations of both countries—the participation of numerous military officials, including those responsible for arms production—and the sites visited by Kim suggest both parties' willingness to strengthen cooperation in the military area. Since at least the end of last year, U.S. intelligence has been asserting that [North Korea has sent artillery ammunition to Russia](#) for its war in Ukraine. Given the likely large scale of strategic reserves and production potential, North Korean support in the form of even less technologically advanced ammunition and military equipment can facilitate further Russian military operations. In return, North Korea can expect technological and equipment support from Russia to help achieve [its 2021-2026 military development plan](#).

Kim's visit to the Vostochny Cosmodrome signals North Korea's interest in Russian assistance in launching military spy satellites (North Korea's two attempts this year have failed, with another planned for October). North Korea may also be keen to establish cooperation with Russia in modernising North Korea's [naval](#) and air forces. In recent months, North Korea has expanded its air bases and unveiled a new missile frigate and a submarine capable of carrying missiles with nuclear warheads. North Korea may be interested in obtaining from Russia newer combat aircraft, spare parts and components for its Soviet-made aircraft, and materials (e.g., aramid fibres) to manufacture ballistic missiles.

Both countries' authorities express their readiness to strengthen economic cooperation, mainly in agriculture, construction, tourism and infrastructure (such as expansion of the Khasan-Rajin railway link). In practice, North Korea and Russia have minimal opportunities to intensify economic ties due to the [economic problems](#) of both countries. Their cooperation may, therefore, be limited to Russian humanitarian aid, including increased food supplies to North Korea. The gradual opening of borders by North Korea also creates the possibility of sending North Korean workers to the Russian Far East. This would again violate UNSCR 2397, which [obliged states](#) to stop accepting North Korean labourers.

Conclusions and Perspectives. North Korea's relations with Russia are transactional, and both countries are treating their cooperation instrumentally. North Korea supports Russia politically and probably militarily in its aggression against Ukraine. In return, it expects Russia to support it at the UNSC and waive the implementation of sanctions and grant food aid and military technological and equipment support. North Korea is using the rapprochement with Russia for internal use to emphasise that it is not

internationally isolated. It also shows that it has room for manoeuvre in foreign policy, which may serve to reduce its dependence on China. Russian political and possibly military support may further encourage North Korea to conduct more advanced missile tests. Russia, in turn, is signalling its willingness to support the development of North Korean military capabilities to increase the sense of threat from that country to the U.S. and its allies in the region. Russia is keen for the U.S. to be more concerned with the situation on the Korean peninsula than in Eastern Europe. While intensifying relations with North Korea, it also pressures South Korea to refrain from supplying munitions to Ukraine.

The extent of Russia's potential support for North Korea will depend on the scale of North Korean supplies of ammunitions and military equipment. A limiting factor in Russian military aid to North Korea is likely solvency problems, meaning technology sales, so barter may occur. Russian-North Korean cooperation may also be limited by China, which has economic influence over both countries. Chinese authorities have not commented on Kim's visit to Russia, which may indicate concern over the prospect of North Korea's rearmament and proliferation of military technologies, including missiles. China does not seem interested in developing trilateral cooperation with Russia and North Korea, as this would further exacerbate [China's relations with the U.S.](#) It would also threaten to worsen ties with Japan and South Korea, with which China wants to resume the trilateral format of leaders meetings, which was suspended after 2019. Therefore, Russian signals about possibly initiating China-Russia-North Korea military exercises (the Russian ambassador to Pyongyang expressed this view) should be assessed as propaganda. Russian-North Korean manoeuvres are more likely, but due to North Korea's shortage of naval and air forces, its contribution to such an endeavour will be limited.

North Korea's rapprochement with Russia will prompt the U.S., Japan, and South Korea to deepen their cooperation, including militarily. It may also lead to a tightening of South Korea's relations with Russia. During the September session of the UN General Assembly, the President of the Republic of Korea Yoon Suk-yeol criticised Russia, indicating that its military cooperation with North Korea would not only pose a threat to Ukraine but also to his country. In this regard, the South Korean authorities are also considering imposing unilateral sanctions on Russia.

The gradual opening of North Korea to foreign contacts will prompt European countries, including Poland, to resume diplomatic activity in Pyongyang. It is intended to maintain channels of communication and restore reciprocity in diplomatic contacts. The North Korean-Russian rapprochement could also boost [NATO's deepening political and intelligence cooperation with its Indo-Pacific partners](#).