



202.464.1982 1800 K Street NW

THE PENINSULA

The Need for a Calibrated Response to the North Korea-Russia

Summit

Published July 5, 2024

Author: [Saeme Kim](#)

Category: [North Korea](#)



The announcement of a “comprehensive strategic partnership” following the North Korea-Russia summit has raised alarm in South Korean domestic politics. A South Korean presidential official has stated that Seoul will reconsider its policy of not providing lethal aid to Ukraine while a left-leaning media outlet [stated](#) that the new partnership indicates the failure of the Yoon Suk Yeol administration for neglecting relations with Russia. While recent developments in North Korea-Russia relations are indeed serious, South Korea should refrain from overreacting and adopt a calibrated response based on how cooperation between North Korea-Russia develops under the new treaty.

The North Korea-Russia Treaty and South Korea's Reaction

On June 19, the much-anticipated summit between leaders of North Korea and Russia took place in Pyongyang. The summit elevated bilateral relations to a comprehensive strategic partnership, the highest form of relations just short of a formal military alliance. The treaty was a detailed text outlining areas of cooperation that had been [building](#) since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Upon ratification, the treaty will replace the Treaty of Friendship, Good Neighborliness, and Cooperation signed in 2000 between Putin and Kim Jong-il.

The contents of the new treaty suggest that the framework for bilateral relations will be long-lasting and multi-faceted. For example, the two sides pledged to work together in the field of food and energy safety, ICT technology, climate change, health, and supply chains (Article 9), as well as expanding cooperation in the fields of economy, investment, and science and technology (Article 10).

Most concerning for South Korea was Article 4, which stated that in the case of an armed invasion, the other party shall provide military and other aid without delay. The concern was that Russia would transfer military hardware and technology to North Korea which would boost North Korea's conventional and nuclear weapons programme, in exchange for North Korea's weapons to be used against Ukraine. Already, evidence from the battlefield suggests that North Korea has provided Russia with artillery shells and ballistic missiles, which both Moscow and Pyongyang have denied.

The day after the summit, South Korean National Security Advisor Chang Ho-jin announced that South Korea may reconsider its policy of providing only non-lethal aid to Ukraine, a stance adopted with consideration to South Korea's relations with Russia. A downward spiral ensued, with Putin threatening to provide North Korea with military technology, and South Korean foreign ministry summoning the Russian ambassador in protest. On June 25, President Yoon commented during a speech at the 74th commemoration of the outbreak of the Korean War that the North Korea-Russia treaty was a blatant violation of United Nations Security Council Resolutions and an "anachronistic act."

The Need for a Calibrated Response

Despite the troubling implications of a deepened North Korea-Russia relationship, the recent warming of relations should be seen in the context of Russia's broader foreign policy objectives rather than an indication of Russia's unconditional and permanent support for the Kim Jong-un regime. Indeed, far from a relationship based on shared values Russia-North Korea relations are transactional and a means to an end.

As it stands, the treaty means different things to Russia and North Korea. For Russia, the treaty with North Korea allows it to extract supplies for its war against Ukraine. More broadly, its relationship with North Korea is but one part of its plan to construct a network to respond to the United States and its network of allies in the Indo-Pacific region, beginning with Putin's trip to China, Belarus, and Uzbekistan in May, then to North Korea and Vietnam in June.

For North Korea, closer relations with Russia raises its international and domestic legitimacy. There are immediate benefits such as increased evasion of international sanctions, including the potential dispatching of North Korean labourers to Russia for much-needed hard currency. Although it is not known what kind of military cooperation has been promised, the mere possibility of military tech transfer has already increased North Korea's level of deterrence and acts as leverage that can distract the US from Russia's war against Ukraine.

However, for both North Korea and Russia, the real question is how China reacts. Developments in future relations between North Korea and Russia will be affected by how China responds, as China is clearly more important to their respective national interests. China's support for Russia has been critical; trade between the two has increased more

than 64 percent since 2021, cushioning the impact of sanctions imposed by the West against Russia since its invasion of Ukraine. China is also allegedly providing critical components as well as drones, engines, and tech for cruise missiles. Thus, Russia cannot turn a blind eye to China's interests in the region, particularly the need for stability and to not attract greater US attention to the areas surrounding the Taiwan strait.

For North Korea, its economic relationship with China is far more important than with Russia. China is North Korea's largest trading partner and last year trade increased by more than 120 percent. Nevertheless, the recent deepening of relations with Russia is an effective way to show North Korea's displeasure with China and a useful reminder to China that North Korea has options beyond China. North Korea is in a strategically advantageous place where it will see what it can extract from Russia before Beijing decides that enough is enough. For example, while an increase in Russo-North Korea trade or transfer of weapons from North Korea to Russia will not make China fret, Russia's transfer of nuclear tech to North Korea could make Beijing step in. This is because a more emboldened nuclear North Korea will push South Korea to pursue its own nuclear weapons and furthermore, South Korea may be able to get away with it even through the international backlash.

Furthermore, it is doubtful whether mutual affection runs deep. Putin waited a long time before visiting North Korea, and the importance that Russia placed on North Korea only came to be publicised after Russia's invasion of Ukraine. While Putin has called the treaty a "groundbreaking document," he has also downplayed the treaty, stating in Hanoi that the contents of the North Korea-Russia treaty are not new, a likely reference to the 1961 treaty between Soviet Union and North Korea which included a clause on military support in the event of an invasion. Moscow has also commented that the treaty does not target South Korea. Putin has also not referred to the new relations as an alliance, which Kim Jong-un has done. Kim Jong-un is likely watching this carefully. He is also unlikely to forget that until December 2017, Russia voted for every UNSC resolutions condemning North Korea's nuclear program.

South Korea's Way Forward

In the coming weeks, South Korea should prioritise three tasks. The first is to tighten trilateral cooperation with the US and Japan as well as with NATO. The US, Japan, and South Korea should take stock of initiatives taken since the Camp David summit last August to institutionalize the trilateral partnership. The second task is to strengthen dialogue with China, highlighting the destabilising effect that North Korea-Russia relations will have on the Korean Peninsula. The third task is to monitor developments in military cooperation between Russia and North Korea; the kinds of military technology transfers taking place, or the resumption of joint military exercises would give greater clarity to the degree of commitment in the two have placed in implementing the treaty. Developments in the relationship between North Korea and Russia, such as the dispatch of North Korean troops to Ukraine or significant enhancement of North Korea's nuclear technology as a result of Russia's support could push South Korea to send its own lethal aid to Ukraine or boost the public rationale for a South Korean indigenous nuclear weapons program. However, South Korea should calibrate its response to the specific steps taken by North Korea and Russia.

Saeme Kim is a Non-Resident Fellow at the Korea Economic Institute. The views expressed here are the author's alone.

Photo from Kremlin.ru, [CC BY 4.0 via Wikimedia Commons](#).

KEI is registered under the FARA as an agent of the Korea Institute for International Economic Policy, a public corporation established by the government of the Republic of Korea. Additional information is available at the Department of Justice, Washington, D.C.

Return to the Peninsula

Tweet

Share

Share

Email