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THE PENINSULA

[2024 in Review] Burgeoning North Korea-Russia Relations

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If we thought North Korea and Russia grew too close for comfort in 2023, they continued to surprise the world this year by taking bold and unprecedented steps to elevate their relations to new heights.

The highlights are the new “DPRK-Russia Treaty on Comprehensive Strategic Partnership,” signed during Putin’s visit to Pyongyang in June, and the post-treaty actions taken by the two countries. Notably, the new treaty stipulates early negotiations “in case of a direct threat of armed invasion” (Article 3), and, similar to the 1961 DPRK-Soviet Union Treaty’s Article 1, “military and other assistance” in case of “armed aggression” (Article 4). Pyongyang and Moscow appear to have invoked these two provisions even before they ratified the treaty in November. Putin’s close confidant Sergei Shoigu visited North Korea in mid-September for back-to-back meetings with Kim. One month later, the South Korean intelligence confirmed that North Korea had started sending troops to Russia. Aside from bilateral military cooperation, the North Korean foreign minister’s unprecedented participation in a BRICS event reflects the North’s increased interest in multilateral institutions. Under Article 7 of the new treaty, Russia can help North Korea join regional and international organizations.

Deepening relations between Pyongyang and Moscow naturally raise questions about their viability beyond the war in Ukraine, particularly given the complex history between two countries. Nobody, perhaps including Kim and Putin, knows the outcome. All we can speak to at this point is intent, and Kim Jong Un’s intentions toward Russia seem to be

longer-term and strategic. North Korea since Kim's summit with Putin in September 2023 has given its relations with Russia an ideological foundation, a move that appears to have been aimed at preparing for a long-term partnership. A ceremony held in Russia recently to honor Kim Il Sung's first visit to the Soviet Union points to a similar effort. Kim Jong Un's latest talks with the visiting Russian defense minister were a definitive indicator. He offered unusually detailed commentary on the war in Ukraine and expressed his most direct, strongest support to Russia to date. This was remarkable given how carefully North Korean state media have handled Russia's ongoing war against Ukraine.

The immediate expediency of this alignment is clear for both sides. The less obvious but important opportunities seen by Kim include international prestige, greater diplomatic leverage, and the opportunity to diversify economic and trade partners and reduce dependency on China. Russia for its part likely will not return to its old place in the world after the war in Ukraine. For that, it may find North Korea a useful partner, particularly if Northeast Asia plays a greater role in Putin's strategic calculus.

Looking ahead, decoupling North Korea and Russia will be challenging, despite the incoming Trump administration's alleged interest in resuming talks with Kim. The strategic value of the United States has dropped for North Korea since the collapse of the Hanoi summit and what it perceived to be waning US power amid great-power competition. Its deepening relations with Russia most likely have only reinforced this thinking and further complicated the strategic environment for the United States and the West.

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