

Putin's June 2024 Visit to North Korea Sends Ripples Through Both East and West

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On June 18-19, Russian President Vladimir Putin made an official visit to North Korea for bilateral talks with Supreme Leader Kim Jong Un. This visit to Pyongyang is Putin's fourth official foreign trip since his "re-election" in March, following his visits to Uzbekistan, Belarus and China in May.

The visit reflects the growing strategic ties between the two neighbours, as Russia receives ammunition in return for political, economic and military-technological support. Moscow's major shift in policy towards Pyongyang and the significant upgrading of relations to formal military allies will have considerable consequences – and cause concern – for not only the West, South Korea and Japan, but also for China, the closest and most vital partner for both Russia and North Korea.

Putin's first visit to Pyongyang since 2000 demonstrates the growing ties between Russia and North Korea in diplomatic, political, economic and military areas in recent years. Several high-level meetings and visits have taken place during the past year: Putin and Kim met in Vladivostok in September, North Korea's Foreign Minister travelled to Moscow in January 2024, and Russia's then-Defense Minister Shoigu went to Pyongyang in July 2023. Recently, North Korean state media called Putin the "Korean people's best friend."

The visit also comes amidst a series of setbacks for Russia's war efforts on the global political scene, at the frontline in Ukraine, and at home. Western military support to Kyiv – after being delayed for much of 2023 – is finally starting to make a difference at the front, as Russia's Kharkiv offensive appears to be failing. This success seems partly due to Ukraine's increasing long-range strikes on strategically vital targets inside of Russia, following the lifting of restrictions by Washington, Berlin and others. Such attacks are heaving an increasing impact on Russia's energy production capacity, and potentially on popular support for the so-called 'special military operation'.

Furthermore, the West seems to finally be waking up and becoming serious about stopping Russia's invasion of Ukraine. This is reflected in several recent political developments, including the G7 compromise to seize frozen Russian assets to supply Ukraine with weapons, increasing US pressure on financial institutions in third countries – mainly China – willing to work with Russian clients, the first-ever EU sanctions on Russia's crucial gas exports, and the Swiss peace summit which sent important signals about Western and global unity in countering Russia.

Western resolve is also increasingly reflected in Chinese caution, as more Chinese banks and financial institutions hesitate in their dealings with Russian customers, and Russian companies report significant payment problems. Accordingly, Chinese export to Russia from March to May 2024 have been 16 % lower than during the same months the year before.

Against this backdrop of Western determination, Ukrainian successes and Chinese wavering, Putin's visit to North Korea is vital both to demonstrate that Russia is not isolated and to secure further military support. North Korea's supply of ammunition to Russia over the past year – dwarfing the EU's ammunition provision to Ukraine – has contributed to ensuring Russia's large advantage in firepower capacity. In return, Moscow has provided Pyongyang with political, economic and technological assistance. This includes blocking the enforcement of UN sanctions against North Korea, supplying food and military technology to assist Pyongyang's arms development.

Apart from expected joint language condemning the West and praising the strength of their bilateral relationship – similar to the tone of Russia-China meetings – the visit also resulted in the signing of a “Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Pact”. Importantly, this pact contains a NATO Article V-like clause binding the parties to “immediately provide military and other assistance with all the means at its disposal” to the other should they “get into a state of war due to an armed aggression”.

The pact potentially signifies the consolidation of a serious shift in Russia's long-term policy towards North Korea. Moscow has gone from supporting sanctions against Pyongyang to seemingly upgrading relations to that of a close military ally, similar to its relations with Belarus. Putin stated that the pact might include military-technological cooperation and that the two countries will “continue to oppose the practice of suffocating sanctions as an instrument the west has come to use to retain its hegemony.” In return, Kim offered “full support” for Russia's war in Ukraine.

The mutual defence clause also raises questions about whether Russia's nuclear umbrella now also covers North Korea, whether Russia could be more easily dragged into a conflict between the two Koreas, and what this means for stability on the Korean Peninsula.

Connected to regional stability and geopolitical developments, Putin's talks with Kim should also be seen in the context of the emerging and complex triad dynamics between Russia, North Korea and China. North Korea has long played the two larger neighbors against each other, and Moscow's support might embolden Pyongyang, while Russia might use its ties with North Korea as leverage to mitigate its dependence on China.

While the two pariah states supporting each other might be useful for Beijing, as it does not have to take the blame or responsibility for a result it nonetheless wants, it could also have serious negative impacts for both China and Russian-Chinese relations. These include a destabilized Korean Peninsula, greater US attention and resources spent in the region and

a strengthened US-Japan-South Korea trio, all of which could restrain Beijing's room for maneuver in its neighbourhood and in navigating its tricky relationship with Washington.

Moreover, if China is increasingly associated with the 'axis of upheaval', this counters Chinese criticism of US 'block thinking' and 'Cold War mentality', might damage China's image as responsible international actor in the eyes of the so-called 'Global South', and undermine its narratives about a 'multipolar world order'. It could also make it harder for China to balance support for Russia with maintaining functioning relations with the West.

Russian support for North Korea's nuclear program might also cross China's red lines. Along with South Korea, Japan and the US, China will now try to understand exactly how far Russia is willing to go in supporting North Korea's nuclear ambitions. South Korea has already responded by saying it will reconsider its policy of only supplying Ukraine with non-lethal aid. Interestingly, Putin's visit follows intensifying political dialogue between China, Japan and South Korea, including a high-level foreign affairs and defence meeting between Beijing and Seoul at the same time as Putin's visit.

Thus, while Putin seeks to secure further a continued stream of weapons and ammunition from Kim, he might also cause irritation and head-scratching with his most important partner, Xi Jinping. Increasingly, Russia and North Korea play similar roles for China – vital but unpredictable and burdensome anti-Western strategic partners that Beijing has to support but is unable to fully control. Whether this is in Putin's interest or not is a separate question.



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