

## Prospects & Perspectives



The signing of the Treaty of Comprehensive Partnership between North Korea and Russia in June 2024 has paved the way for strengthening bilateral ties between Moscow and Pyongyang and marked the onset of the global order transition, which was already underway. Picture source: President of Russia, June 18, 2024, *President of Russia*, <<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/trips/74342/photos>>.

### Russia and North Korea Join Forces in the War Against Ukraine: Global Ramifications

By *Abhishek Sharma*

**I**n the Indo-Pacific region, if one development would prove to be a landmark event in the region's modern history, it would be the signing of the



*Treaty of Comprehensive Partnership between North Korea and Russia* in June 2024. The partnership has paved the way for strengthening bilateral ties between Moscow and Pyongyang and marked the onset of the global order transition, which was already underway. The institutionalization of the U.S., South Korea, and Japan's trilateral security cooperation has also given Russia and North Korea another strategic reason to collaborate. Therefore, with the geopolitical alignment changing in Eurasia and Indo-Pacific, we are again seeing the emergence of an alliance similar to the situation post World War II.

### **North Korea-Russia strategic ties: Military as a stepping stone**

Relations between North Korea and Russia have gone through a whirlwind since the end of World War II. The ties started with a strong foundation with the onset of the Cold War, following it, Pyongyang adopted a balanced foreign policy between the Soviet Union and China that culminated with strengthening ties with the latter in the face of the Soviet Union's disintegration in the late 1980s. Nonetheless, after 2000, both countries tried stabilizing their relations in the face of continuing hurdles, such as North Korea's adamant policy to develop Nuclear weapons, which proved to be a friction point. However, things started changing after 2017 when Russia's foreign policy took incremental shifts towards North Korea. Russia's Northeast Asia policy took a U-turn with its invasion of Ukraine when it urgently needed more weapons to fight against Ukraine, supported by NATO countries.

While the strategic logic behind establishing the deep ties between Moscow and Pyongyang started due to the former's need to secure a continuous supply of weapons and equipment, both parties soon realized the importance of forging a strategic alliance due to changing geopolitical dynamics in Eurasia and the Indo-Pacific. The expanding ties now cover areas beyond the military, aimed at strengthening comprehensive relations across all areas of cooperation, realizing the constraining effect of Western sanctions, the Russia-North Korea partnership has fastened the pace of economic and labour mobility between the two countries and opened avenues for closer technology and defense cooperation. The deployment of 10,000 North Korean troops was one such example of the extent to which this partnership has evolved, essentially into an alliance, where one ally is ready to send its soldiers to defend another country's sovereignty (or claims thereof). The closeness of Moscow and Pyongyang can be judged based on the number of meetings between their foreign ministers. Since last year, Sergei



Lavrov, the Russian foreign minister, and Choe Sun Hui, the DPRK foreign minister, met six times.

The extent of military cooperation between Russia and North Korea highlights the close ties. North Korea has supplied Moscow with 13,000 containers of arms, including 6 million 152 mm artillery shells. Recently, it was reported that North Korea has also supplied Russia with a long-range rocket and artillery system, these include fifty 170mm M1989 self-propelled howitzers and twenty 240mm multiple rocket launchers. U.S. Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin stated that “North Korea has sent around 10,000 of its soldiers to train in eastern Russia ... our most recent information indicates that about 8,000 of those DPRK soldiers are now in the Kursk Oblast.”

### **Defense technology cooperation next**

In exchange for its materiel support, Shin Won-sik, South Korea’s National Security Adviser, said that they believe North Korea has received anti-air missiles and anti-air defense equipment from Russia. However, besides defense equipment support, North Korea has received critical oil supplies from Moscow. Russia has supplied North Korea with 1 million barrels of oil since March this year, violating the 500,000-barrel oil cap mandated by the UN Security Council. Technology is one area of cooperation where countries share converging interests; hence, we can expect deepening ties as their relations progress, for instance, recently, North Korea and Russia jointly hosted an Information Technology expo in Pyongyang, signaling their intention to deepen cooperation in technology.

Irrespective of the developments being limited to North Korea and Russia, it would be a mistake to see the deployment of North Korean soldiers in Russia just as a bilateral issue. Rather, this development showcases the undergoing change in the world order. All these events, including the worsening situation in the Middle East, help these countries crystalize the world’s future, particularly the Indo-Pacific, where we see “like-minded” countries coming together, also known as the Axis of Upheaval — China, Iran, North Korea and Russia.

### **China, the Indo-Pacific and the emergence of a global axis**

Going forward, the Indo-Pacific region will become the center of focus due to its economic and geopolitical importance. Therefore, to understand the future of the Indo-Pacific better, it will be critical to understand China, the most crucial



stakeholder and important part of this axis of upheaval.

Looking at the Chinese stance on the deepening partnership between Russia and North Korea gives an insight into what we can expect. While China has not said much about this relationship, its choice of words signals its comfort. For instance, after the signing of the Russia-DPRK treaty, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) spokesperson said, “The Chinese side noted that the DPRK and Russia, as friendly and close neighbors, have the legitimate need for exchanges, cooperation and development of relations.” On another occasion, the Chinese MFA spokesperson stated, “The DPRK and Russia are two independent sovereign states, and how to develop bilateral relations is a matter for themselves.” Both these statements highlight China’s tactful support for this relationship. Beijing has underplayed these relations under its strategic ambiguity policy to protect its close trade relations with South Korea, Japan, and other Western countries, particularly Europe.

However, this will not continue for long if the West takes steps to strengthen its security alliances. Following that, it will become difficult for Beijing to hide its biases. For instance, after the institutionalization of the U.S., Japan and South Korea Trilateral security cooperation, Beijing made it clear that despite North Korean action, Beijing’s support for Pyongyang remains steadfast. The statement released after Chinese leader Xi Jinping’s and U.S. President Joe Biden’s meeting states, “China does not allow conflict and turmoil to happen on the Korean Peninsula. It will not sit idly by when its strategic security and core interests are threatened.” This shows that although China has tried to distance itself from Russia and North Korea, when push comes to shove, it will side with its neighbors against the West. China’s “No Limit partnership” with Russia and the Treaty with North Korea are examples of its continued commitment. Sensing this closeness between China-Russia and Russia-North Korea, Kurt Campbell, U.S. Deputy Secretary of States, acknowledged that this emerging axis seriously threatens the U.S. strategic interests in the region.

North Korea and Russia’s strengthening ties should therefore not be interpreted as a stand-alone event but as part of a larger trend, symbolic of the coming together of countries that share an interest in changing the world order they feel has been unfair to them. Therefore, all these developments, even if regional, hold the potential for global ramifications.



(Abhishek Sharma is a Research Assistant at the Observer Research Foundation, India and a Ph.D. Candidate in Korean Studies at the Department of East Asian Studies at Delhi University.)

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*No.1, Lane 60, Sec. 3, Tingzhou Rd., Zhongzheng District*

*Taipei City, 10087, Republic of China (Taiwan)*

*Tel: 886-2-23654366 Fax: 886-2-23679193*

*<http://www.pf.org.tw>*

