

NORTH KOREA/RUSSIA: Planned summit meeting just the tip of a dangerous iceberg

- Reports of a planned Putin-Kim summit is only the latest instance of growing DPRK-Russia cooperation in the diplomatic, economic, and military spheres.
- The transactional relationship is also designed to make life difficult for the US and its partners, who have few efficacious tools with which to respond to the emerging axis.
- An immediate concern is whether Russia will supply missile technologies in return for more North Korean weapons; longer-term, aggressive military posturing could ignite a crisis on the Korean peninsula.

Gradually...

Reports that Kim Jong-un plans to travel to Russia and meet Vladimir Putin on the sidelines of the Eastern Economic Forum on 10-13 September in Vladivostok would represent the first such meeting since 2019, and likely Kim's first international trip since before the Covid-19 pandemic. However, as we highlighted in [January](#), the meeting is not coming out of the blue, but rather reflects levels of cooperation in the past two months that have increased gradually, then quickly. There may also be much more beneath the surface than is currently apparent to outside observers.

After Russia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine, North Korea (DPRK) defended the move at the United Nations and helped veto a UN resolution condemning the move. Pyongyang in July 2022 then recognized the 'independence' of two partly Russian-occupied regions of Ukraine—the Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) and the Luhansk People's Republic (LPR)—and announced plans to send workers to these regions after it eventually lifted its pandemic border restrictions. According to US intelligence reports, the DPRK has also been supplying artillery shells, rockets, and other weapons to support Russia's war efforts in Ukraine. In return, Moscow vetoed all UN-mandated punitive actions in response to the DPRK's ballistic missile tests in 2022 and 2023 and joined Pyongyang in condemning US-ROK joint military exercises, stating that "Russia stands in the same trench with the DPRK."

... then quickly

Ties between the two seemed to accelerate quickly in the past two months. Russia's defense minister Sergei Shoigu was the highest-ranking foreign official to attend North Korea's Victory Day celebrations in late July, and Kim provided unusually visible VIP treatment to Shoigu including a one-on-one meeting and an in-person tour of a military exhibition. Kim also announced plans to expand cooperation.

Putin, in a congratulatory letter to Kim on Victory Day, promised to increase political, economic, and security ties with North Korea in return for its "firm support for the special operation" of the invasion of Ukraine and solidarity on key international issues against "the collective West". Analysis of railway traffic between the two countries since late-2022 suggests Russia has been increasingly supplying the iron ore, petroleum, and food that North Korea desperately needs after about three years of self-imposed lockdown. In return, Moscow is likely seeking further military supplies from DPRK, which are crucial to sustaining the war effort in Ukraine. Shoigu also raised the possibility of joint military exercises, and now more arms deals appear to be in the pipeline.

Tactical and strategic implications

Near-term, one major concern is whether Russian cooperation will extend to supplying new ballistic missile technology to North Korea, something the Kim regime desires even above food imports for its citizens. A recent CSIS report highlighted similarities between Soviet-era ICBMs and the DPRK's 'new' Hwasong-18 missiles; the trajectory of this cooperation suggests that Moscow could continue to help Pyongyang enhance its missile arsenal. Another major concern is the increased weapons supplies from DPRK to Russia, which could help Moscow sustain its military operations in Ukraine amid growing uncertainty over capacity and political will in the West to continue large-scale military support for Ukraine.

Though the cooperation transactional at its roots, Kim and Putin likely understand its strategic value to show the United States and its allies and partners that there are negative externalities to Western opposition to the war in Ukraine, including in relation to US interests in East Asia. It also sends a signal that Kim and Putin can make life difficult for President Joe Biden, and that they too are capable of building coalitions.

For the United States and its allies and partners, there are relatively few efficacious tools with which to respond to these developments. They could enact more sanctions on Russian individuals and companies doing business with North Korea, though this list is already extensive. They could also draw attention at the upcoming UN general assembly and gatherings involving ASEAN and APEC countries that various Russia-North Korea deals are in violation of UN security council resolutions and request further sanctions, but there is no guarantee of success. More broadly, negotiations towards the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula seem as far away as ever, while Beijing's evolving ties with Moscow and Pyongyang mean that it will not cooperate with US-led actions against the new axis.

The current state of DRPK-Russia relations does not point to dangerous escalation as a short-term risk on the Korean peninsula. However, as this collaboration continues over the longer-term, it has the potential to boost the military capabilities on both sides, and potentially embolden them. If this translates to more aggressive posturing and joint military exercises in the seas and skies around the peninsula, it raises the risk of an accidental encounter that could ignite a significant crisis.

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