

NORTH KOREA-RUSSIA RELATIONS: POST PUTIN-KIM SUMMIT

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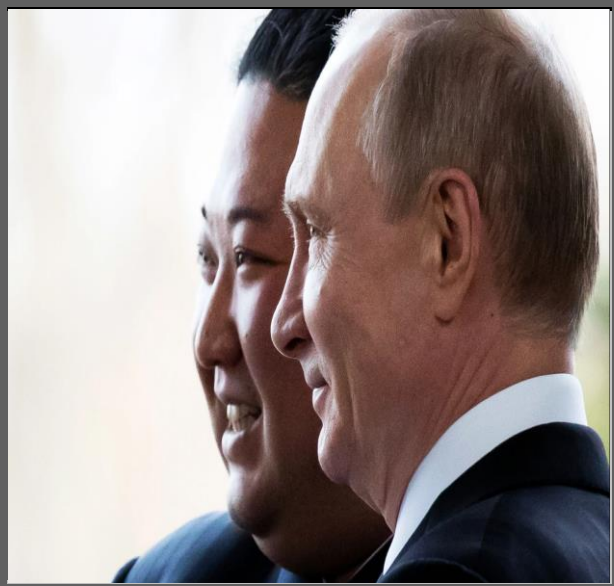
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(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



One of the most prominent highlights of September 2023 was the Summit between Russian President Vladimir Putin and North Korean Supreme Leader Kim Jong-Un which took place in Far-East Russia.

The Summit affirmed U.S. intelligence reports that were made public weeks before the actual meeting took place on September 13, 2023. This further added to the suspense and hype of the Summit when it was finally revealed, with scant details, that the two leaders will be meeting in Russia's Far East regions where President Putin was already present to attend the Eastern Economic Forum - EEF.

Kim Jong-Un's Visit to Russia:

North Korean Supreme Leader Kim Jong-Un's official visit to Russia took place from September 12-17, 2023. He arrived on his armoured train and entered the Russian territory on September 12, 2023. Undertaken on the invitation of Russian President Vladimir Putin, this was his first official visit abroad after the breakout of the COVID-19 pandemic. In all, this was Kim Jong-Un's second visit to Russia. The last time he visited Russia was in April 2019.

The 5-day visit was preceded by a visit of Russian Ministry of Defence delegation to Pyongyang led by Russia's Defence Minister Sergey Shoigu in late July 2023.¹

¹ "Russian military delegation arrives in North Korea to join Chinese", Reuters, published on July 26, 2023. <https://www.reuters.com/world/russian-delegation-join-chinese-north-korea-visit-2023-07-25/>

During the visit of the Russian delegation, a Chinese delegation was also visiting North Korea which was being led by the Chinese Communist Party Politburo member Li Hongzhong.

Visit to North Korea by the Russian Ministry of Defence delegation was the first such public visit by any foreign delegates to North Korea after the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.

During this visit, the Russian and Chinese delegations took part in the celebration of the 70th anniversary of "Victory Day" in Pyongyang and the Russian Defence Minister Shoigu was also accompanied by DPRK leader Kim to a defence exhibition.²

During his stay in Russia, DPRK's Kim Jong-Un had a busy time which included visits to several important sites across the Russian Far-East and interactions with high officials of the Russian military and local administration.

In the Amur region, Kim met President Putin in Vostochny Cosmodrome (a remote Russian spaceport) on September 13, 2023. The meeting between the two leaders is said to have lasted for five hours and later Kim visited a number of facilities in Russia's Far East.

In Komsomolsk-on-Amur, Kim visited the production site for Su-35 and Su-57 aircraft on September 15, 2023 and familiarized himself with the Super jet -100 (SJ 100) project. He also visited one of the production centres of United Aircraft Corporation (UAC).

Moreover, on September 16, 2023, Kim arrived in the Primorye region, accompanied by Russia's Defence Minister Sergey Shoigu who showed Kim the country's latest warplanes and the Kinzhal hypersonic missile system, including the MiG-31I supersonic missile carrier.

While in Vladivostok (administrative capital of the Primorye Oblast - region), Kim also inspected the Marshal Shaposhnikov frigate (of Russia's Pacific Fleet - in presence of the Russian Naval Chief), attended a performance of Pyotr Tchaikovsky's ballet the 'Sleeping Beauty', visited Far Eastern Federal University, an aquarium and an Arnika Group factory that specializes in the production of feed components.³

The North Korean leader returned to Pyongyang aboard his armoured train on September 19, 2023.

The North Korean state-media termed Kim's visit to Russia as 'historic'.

² *"North Korea's Kim shows off banned missiles to Russia's Shoigu"*, Aljazeera, published on July 27, 2023. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/7/27/north-koreas-kim-shows-off-banned-missiles-to-russias-shoigu>

³ *"Kim Jong Un's visit to Russia changes global political situation - official"*, TASS Russian News Agency, published on September 22, 2023. <https://tass.com/world/1678725>

Overview of North Korea-Russia Relations:

Bilateral relations between North Korea and Russia are not a new phenomenon as they date back to the mid-1940s when Imperial Japan, after its loss in World War II (WW2), relinquished its control over the Korean Peninsula, ending its colonial rule. This resulted in the peninsula being divided into Northern and Southern parts, with the North supported by the then Soviet Union (now Russia) and the South backed by the United States of America (U.S.).

Moscow installed Kim Il-Sung (Kim Jong-Un's grandfather) as leader in Pyongyang. Kim Il-Sung commanded a Korean contingent as a Major in the Soviet Army.⁴ He, with the help of the Soviet Union, established the communist North Korean state in 1948.

In 1950, Kim Il-Sung's forces invaded South Korea.⁵ South Korea's allies like the U.S. rushed to its help and a bloody war ensued which claimed the lives of millions on both sides. An armistice was reached in 1953. However, it left the peninsula in a technical state of war.

The USSR continued to supply North Korea with economic and military assistance throughout this time. In 1961, Kim Il-Sung signed a defence pact/ treaty with Khrushchev (then leader of USSR) which stipulated that Moscow will come to Pyongyang's defence in the event of an attack by an adversary. The pact remained intact till 1991.

After the disintegration of the USSR, the new government in the post-communist Russian Federation (RF) let the military alliance with Pyongyang to expire.

This ultimately deprived North Korea of the financial and military support that it was getting from its primary economic and defence benefactor.

It was only in the year 2000, when Vladimir Putin got elected as Russia's President that he paid an official visit to North Korea in July 2000⁶ to meet Kim Jong-Il to re-establish DPRK and Russia relations and sign another comprehensive military cooperation agreement between the two countries.

⁴ The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, "*Kim Il-Sung*", Britannica, History & Society, updated on September 14, 2023. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Kim-Il-Sung>

⁵ "*A short history of the Korean War*", Imperial War Museums, accessed September 20, 2023. <https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/a-short-history-of-the-korean-war#:~:text=North%20Korea%2C%20supported%20by%20the,tens%20of%20thousands%20of%20casualties.>

⁶ Herskovitz and Cha, "*North Korea Says Putin May Visit Pyongyang After 'Epoch-Making' Talks With Kim in Russia*", TIME magazine, published on September 14, 2023. <https://time.com/6313947/kim-invite-putin-visit-north-korea/>

However, despite this warming of relations, long-term and larger geopolitical interests of Russia gained precedence over interests pertaining to bilateral relations with North Korea.

Russia, a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), supported UN sanctions against North Korea during the 2000s over DPRK's nuclear weapons and missile programme. Russia did try to bring Pyongyang to the negotiating table to discuss abandoning its nuclear programme but the talks ultimately collapsed in December 2008. Besides Russia, other members of the 6-Party Talks included the United States, China, Japan and South Korea.

Then, in 2012, Moscow wrote off 90% of the US\$ 11 billion debt of North Korea⁷ in a bid to improve engagement, which was now under the new leadership of Kim Jong-Un and also to increase Russia's influence in the East-Asia region.

But then again in 2016 and 2017, Russia along with China backed UNSC sanctions against North Korea's fast growing nuclear and missile programme. These sanctions did have an adverse impact on North Korea which compelled Kim Jong-Un to resume diplomacy with the U.S. and South Korea while also simultaneously make attempts at improving ties with China and Russia in 2017.

Nonetheless, in 2019, diplomacy with Washington failed once again and Kim undertook his first visit to Russia in 2019. The summit, however, failed to generate any substantial, practical results.

Then the COVID-19 pandemic hit the world in early 2020 and North Korea closed off its borders to the rest of the world.

Current Trajectory of North Korea-Russia Relations:

The current trajectory of bilateral relations between DPRK and Russia seems to be distinctively positive at the moment. The statements coming from official circles in Moscow and Pyongyang regarding the recent Summit between President Putin and Supreme Leader Kim are celebratory, full of praise, and hopeful about bright prospects ahead.

Relations between Moscow and Pyongyang really started to warm up after the commencement of the Russia-Ukraine conflict in February of 2022, in which North Korea fully backed Moscow's actions by stating that the West's 'imperialist' and 'expansionist' designs justified Russia's actions.

⁷ Dyakina and Kelly, "Russia writes off 90 percent of North Korea's debt", Reuters, published on September 18, 2012.
<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-korea-north-debt-idUSBRE88H0NH20120918>

Similar statements were reiterated by Kim Jong-Un during his meeting with President Putin in mid-September as well, where he assured his host of his full support against the West and added that his visit was a clear manifestation of DPRK "prioritizing the strategic importance" of its relations with Russia.⁸

Moreover, in mid-2022, North Korea officially recognized the independence of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions that separated from Ukraine.⁹

In addition, in May 2022, Russia along with China also opposed new UNSC sanctions against North Korea for carrying out record missile tests,¹⁰ breaking the UNSC unanimity for the very first time since 2006.

And now, the recent developments, especially with regards to DPRK-Russia defence cooperation have made many countries uncomfortable, especially in the West and the immediate neighbourhood of North Korea.

The apprehensions in the Western countries (particularly the U.S.), as well as in Pyongyang's neighbours (primarily Japan and South Korea), stem from U.S. intelligence reports and persistent warnings issued from Washington about North Korea secretly providing arms, primarily artillery ammunition to Russia to be used against Ukraine in violation of UNSC resolutions.¹¹

The U.S. intelligence reports claim that due to Russia's 'city-flattening' strategy in Ukraine, combined with unprecedented sanctions, its artillery and missile stockpiles have depleted to a great extent while its military industrial complex is unable to keep up with the demand for such arms, hence, Moscow is now looking to replenish its arsenal by procuring arms and ammunition from multiple countries, where such weapons are not only readily available in huge amounts, but are compatible with Russia's weapons systems, can easily be transferred to the battlefield and are affordable as well.

⁸ McCurry and Roth, "Kim Jong-un offers Putin 'full support' in Russia's 'sacred fight' with west", The Guardian, published on September 13, 2023.
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/sep/13/kim-jong-un-putin-weapons-talk-russian-space-base-amur>

⁹ Kim Tong-Hyung, "North Korea recognizes Russia-backed breakaway republics in Ukraine", Los Angeles Times, published on July 14, 2022.
<https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2022-07-14/north-korea-recognizes-independence-ukraine-breakaway-republics>

¹⁰ Michelle Nichols, "China, Russia veto U.S. push for more U.N. sanctions on North Korea", Reuters, published on May 27, 2022.
<https://www.reuters.com/world/china-russia-veto-us-push-more-un-sanctions-north-korea-2022-05-26/>

¹¹ Michele Kelemen, "U.S. says Russia has made 'shameful' moves toward new North Korea arms deals", NPR, published on August 30, 2023.
<https://www.npr.org/2023/08/30/1196835209/russia-north-korea-arms-deal-us-intelligence>

Russia reportedly made similar procurements from Iran as well by buying Shahed-136 drones and Fateh-110 and Zolfaghar Iranian short-range surface-to-surface ballistic missiles in the recent past.¹²

As per White House statement in December 2022, the Russian private military contractor *Wagner Group* purchased weapons from North Korea for its operations inside Ukraine.¹³ The U.S. had also imposed sanctions against multiple entities that facilitated arms deals between DPRK and Russia recently as well.¹⁴

Even before the recent Summit, it was being speculated that the talks between the leaders (Putin and Kim) might result in the transfers of munitions and military technology and trade-off of other goods/ commodities due to the prevailing circumstances both the countries are facing at the moment.

Experts predicted that any such trade-off between DPRK and Russia would be a win-win situation for both countries.

Since DPRK's Kim controls a vast domestic military industrial complex that produces Russian compatible (mainly Soviet-era) arms and ammunition that are still being used by Russia on a massive scale against Ukraine, can be readily provided to Russia in huge amounts in exchange for food and fuel commodities to keep its highly sanctioned economy afloat along with hard currency to function. Besides, it also required access to some latest and advanced technology which Russia can easily provide (due to its prowess in military technology) to continue with its armament plans such as:

- Military modernization
- Building more powerful Inter-Continental Ballistic Missiles - ICBMs (with enhanced range)
- Development of nuclear-armed attack submarines
- Launching new spy satellite

¹² Michael Georgy, "Iran agrees to ship missiles, more drones to Russia", Reuters, published on October 19, 2022.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/exclusive-iran-agrees-ship-missiles-more-drones-russia-defying-west-sources-2022-10-18/>

¹³ Steve Holland, "Exclusive: US says Russia's Wagner Group bought North Korean weapons for Ukraine War", Reuters, published on December 23, 2022.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/us-says-russias-wagner-group-bought-north-korean-weapons-ukraine-war-2022-12-22/>

¹⁴ "US slaps sanctions on entities over alleged arms deals between North Korea, Russia", Reuters, published on August 16, 2023.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/us-slaps-sanctions-entities-over-alleged-arms-deals-between-north-korea-russia-2023-08-16/>

However, so far the Kremlin has denied all speculations regarding the signing of any defence agreements with North Korea.¹⁵

Ahead and even after the September's Putin-Kim Summit, U.S. and South Korea expressed their concerns regarding DPRK-Russia actively advancing arms negotiations. Both countries warned Russia and North Korea about the consequences they will have to face in the international community with U.S. stating that "*North Korea will pay a price*",¹⁶ and South Korea making clear that it "*will not stand idly by*" if North Korea receives Russian help to boost its weapons of mass destruction.¹⁷

In response to these warnings, President Putin had stated that Russia does not intend to violate any sanctions on North Korea and is only looking to build good relations with its neighbour.¹⁸ North Korea, however, chose to remain silent on the warnings and continued to celebrate Kim's visit to Russia by stating that it "took Korean-Russian relations to new strategic heights" and 'fundamentally changed the world's political environment'.¹⁹

Although Russian officials have categorically rejected any speculations being made in the Western, Japanese and South Korean media and policy circles about military and military-technical cooperation between DPRK and Russia,²⁰ several developments and statements made during and after the September Summit between President Putin and DPRK's Kim suggest otherwise.

For instance, Kim's visit to multiple Russian aeronautical facilities and observance of Russia's Pacific Fleet and the location of the Summit meeting, Vostochny Cosmodrome, carried symbolic significance.

¹⁵ "Russia and North Korea did not sign any military or other agreements during summit, Kremlin says", Reuters, published on September 15, 2023. <https://www.reuters.com/world/russia-n-korea-did-not-sign-any-military-or-other-agreements-during-summit-2023-09-15/>

¹⁶ "North Korea will 'pay a price' if it supplies arms to Russia, says US", The Guardian, published on September 06, 2023. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/sep/06/north-korea-will-pay-a-price-if-it-supplies-arms-to-russia-says-us>

¹⁷ Law and Yeung, "South Korea says it 'will not stand idly by' if North Korea receives Russian help on nuclear weapons", CNN, published on September 20, 2023. <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/09/20/asia/south-korea-north-korea-russia-ukraine-unga-intl-hnk/index.html>

¹⁸ Christy Lee, "Russia-North Korea Ties: Will Putin-Kim Bromance Last?", Voice of America - VOA, published on September 21, 2023. <https://www.voanews.com/a/russia-nkorea-ties-will-putin-kim-bromance-last-/7277519.html>

¹⁹ "Kim Jong Un's visit to Russia changes global political situation - official", TASS Russian News Agency, published on September 22, 2023. <https://tass.com/world/1678725>

²⁰ "Media speculations on Russian-DPRK military cooperation groundless - embassy", TASS Russian News Agency, published on September 19, 2023. <https://tass.com/politics/1677013>

This was something which observers picked on and interpreted as Russia showing its willingness to assist North Korea in fulfilling its objective of launching its own (spy) satellite into space. Suspicions were given credence by President Putin's response to reporters' inquiries about the topic when he stated, "*that's why we came here*".²¹

Also, before the Summit, when reporters asked President Putin if he would discuss obtaining supplies from North Korea to replenish Moscow's dwindling stock of weapons and ammunition, he responded by saying that they would discuss "all issues".²²

There was also a statement by the Kremlin which stated that Russia could train a cosmonaut from North Korea and send the individual into space if North Korea is interested.²³

Apart from this, the most important point which indicated the defence-centric agenda (primarily) of Kim Jong-Un's visit to Russia was the make-up of DPRK's delegation that accompanied him and held different delegation-level talks. The North Korean delegation included top military commanders, arms industry officials, directors and Vice Premier of DPRK's economy, construction and light industry departments along with the Defence and Foreign Ministers of the country as well.²⁴

Moreover, Russian Defence Minister Shoigu's visit to North Korea to attend the 70th Anniversary of the 'Victory Day' and later visiting a missile production plant is an indication of what might have been discussed during such exchanges and what can be expected in the near future.

Furthermore, there are multiple other signs, besides the recent Putin-Kim Summit, testifying to warming relations between North Korea and Russia such as Russia's offer to provide food assistance to North Korea free of charge.²⁵

²¹ Jesse Johnson, "*At talks, Putin tells Kim Russia could help North Korea build satellites*", The Japan Times, published on September 13, 2023.

<https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2023/09/13/asia-pacific/politics/north-korea-kim-jong-un-russia-vladimir-putin-summit/>

²² "*Talks between North Korea's Kim and Putin end in Russia: What did they say?*", Aljazeera, published on September 13, 2023.

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/9/13/putin-kim-share-warm-welcomes-in-during-second-meeting-in-four-years>

²³ "*Putin, Kim Jong Un discuss potential training of North Korean cosmonaut - Kremlin*", TASS Russian News Agency, published on September 13, 2023. <https://tass.com/politics/1674485>

²⁴ Hyonhee Shin, "*Kim Jong Un: Who is with North Korea's leader on trip to Russia?*", Reuters, published on September 13, 2023.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/who-is-accompanying-north-koreas-kim-trip-russia-2023-09-12/#:~:text=Among%20other%20delegates%20were%20Defence,Ryong%2C%20director%20of%20the%20Munitions>

²⁵ "*Russia ready to offer food assistance to North Korea – Russian ambassador*", TASS Russian News Agency, published on September 18, 2023. <https://tass.com/politics/1676147>

In addition, as per Russia's Natural Resources Minister Alexander Kozlov, air service between North Korea and Russia which is currently in test mode, will soon begin full-fledged operation in the near future.²⁶

The Minister also stated that the Intergovernmental Commission of Russia and North Korea will be held this November in Pyongyang²⁷ to further discuss matters related to the development of agriculture, the development of transport infrastructure, transport service, cultural exchanges, education, and medical issues.

At the end of the Summit between Russian President Putin and North Korea's Kim Jong-Un, the latter extended an invitation to the former to visit Pyongyang in the near future which was 'graciously' accepted'.²⁸

To this end, the Kremlin has confirmed that President Putin's visit (date of which is yet to be confirmed) to North Korea will be preceded by a visit by Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov to Pyongyang.²⁹ FM Lavrov might also be accompanied by an expert delegation during this visit as well.³⁰

And on the North Korean side, after returning from Russia, the North Korean leader requested during a meeting of the Political Bureau of Central Committee of the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK) to take "active efficient measures" to strengthen relations with Russia in all areas.³¹

Conclusion:

Summing up the developments highlighted above, it can safely be concluded that bilateral relations between North Korea and Russia are once again on an upward trajectory, despite the warnings coming from countries like the U.S., Japan, South Korea and members of the European Union.

²⁶ "Air service between Russia, North Korea working in test mode – natural resources minister", TASS Russian News Agency, published on September 17, 2023. <https://tass.com/politics/1676073>

²⁷ "Russia's delegation discuss agriculture, transport issues with Kim Jong Un", TASS Russian News Agency, published on September 17, 2023. <https://tass.com/world/1676069>

²⁸ "Vladimir Putin accepts Kim Jong Un invitation to North Korea", Aljazeera, published on September 14, 2023. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/9/14/vladimir-putin-accepts-kim-jong-un-invitation-to-north-korea>

²⁹ "Date of Putin's trip to North Korea not yet set – Kremlin", TASS Russian News Agency, published on September 26, 2023. <https://tass.com/politics/1680623>

³⁰ "Primorye governor to join delegation visiting North Korea", TASS Russian News Agency, published on September 17, 2023. <https://tass.com/politics/1676021>

³¹ "Kim Jon Un requests taking active measures to strengthen relations with Russia", TASS Russian News Agency, published on September 22, 2023. <https://tass.com/world/1678727>

Many experts are calling the warming DPRK-Russia relations as a marriage of convenience, but this is how international relations function. There is no doubt that there are multiple underlying political, economic, strategic and ideological factors that have brought the two countries together.

China is another factor that has a significant impact on the DPRK-Russia dynamic. North Korea, for more than two decades, has been considered China's 'area of influence'. Despite sanctions, China continues to be the largest trading partner of North Korea. Its exports to Pyongyang in June 2023 were eight times higher than a year before.

The recent visits by Chinese and Russian delegations to North Korea in July 2023 are being viewed by many experts and analysts as a revival of a coalition that existed back in the 1940s and 1950s. But this time, this coalition is actively being led by China instead of USSR (now Russia) as was the case in the past.

Whether North Korea and Russia will end up trading in arms and ammunition, advanced military and satellite technology, and other commodities or not, only time will tell. However, it is highly probable that Russia will definitely refrain from violating any major sanctions related to North Korea or provide it with any kind of advanced missile and satellite technology because such a move will be extremely counter-productive to its short and long-term national interests.

Besides, Russia has always been highly protective of its advanced military technology and has avoided sharing such technology even with close friends. North Korea might get assistance from Russia in launching satellites but the assistance will always fall short of enabling North Korea to a dangerous extent where it can pose a significant threat to its neighbours like Japan and South Korea and especially the U.S.

Moreover, Russia will also avoid overstepping or getting ahead of China in cooperating with North Korea. Even China has acted very carefully in dealing with North Korea in order to not violate international sanctions regime or invite criticism from the international community, particularly the West.

However, it can be expected that Russia might indulge in conventional arms & ammunition trade with North Korea because the need is definitely there and Russia also believes that it can get away with it since U.S. and its allies have also indulged in similar practice when the West violated several

contractual obligations by sending Soviet-era weaponry to Ukraine (reference to FM Lavrov's statement on September 13, 2023³²).

The combined strategic competition of North Korea and Russia against the U.S. absent diplomacy is a strong binding and motivating factor for the former two which is definitely leading them to further deepen their cooperation and strengthen their bilateral ties. And if things continue to develop at the current pace between DPRK and Russia as they are now, their relationship will likely assume a more strategic dimension in the time to come.

³² *"Russia's Lavrov says situation has changed since North Korea was hit by U.N. sanctions"*, Reuters, published on September 13, 2023.
<https://www.reuters.com/world/russias-lavrov-says-situation-has-changed-since-north-korea-was-hit-by-un-2023-09-13/>