

## STRATEGIC ENGAGEMENTS IN A MULTIPOLAR ERA: PUTIN'S 2024 VISIT TO NORTH KOREA

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



President Vladimir Putin's state visit to the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK – North Korea) on June 18-19, 2024, marks a significant development in the geopolitical landscape of East Asia. This visit, the first by a Russian leader in nearly two decades, underscores the evolving dynamics in the region amidst heightened tensions and shifting alliances. This issue brief will delve into the key aspects of the visit, its strategic implications, and the broader context of Russia-North Korea relations.

Historically, Russia and North Korea have shared a complex relationship, shaped by ideological ties, strategic interests, and mutual dependencies.<sup>1</sup> The Soviet Union was a key ally of North Korea during the Cold War, providing economic and military support. However, the dissolution of the Soviet Union and subsequent economic turmoil in Russia led to a cooling of relations. In recent years, as both countries faced increasing international isolation—Russia due to its actions in Ukraine and North Korea due to its nuclear ambitions—their strategic interests have aligned once again.

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<sup>1</sup> Taimur Khan, "North Korea-Russia Relations: Post Putin-Kim Summit", Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad (ISSI), Issue Brief, published on October 10, 2023.  
<https://issi.org.pk/issue-brief-on-north-korea-russia-relations-post-putin-kim-summit/>

## Key Outcomes of the Visit:

### 1. Renewed Bilateral Agreements:

- **New Treaty:** The latest agreement between Russia and North Korea replaces the Friendship, Cooperation and Good Neighbourliness Treaty signed in 2000 and more closely echoes the Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance signed in 1961.<sup>2</sup> The new pact states that if either country is invaded or pushed into a state of war, the other must deploy “all means at its disposal without delay” to provide “military and other assistance,” raising the possibility that a U.S. strike on North Korea could draw a Russian response.<sup>3</sup> President Putin described this deal as a “breakthrough document,” reflecting the two countries’ desire to lift their “relations to a new qualitative level.”<sup>4</sup>

### 2. Economic Cooperation:

- **Trade and Energy:** In a letter published in North Korea's Rodong Sinmun the day before his visit, President Putin promised to develop new forms of trade and cooperation and “resist illegitimate unilateral restrictions.”<sup>5</sup> Last September, DPRK leader Kim Jong-Un had visited Russia and reached an important agreement to address North Korea's energy shortage. Russia agreed to provide North Korea with 300,000 tons of refined oil and 100,000 tons of agricultural diesel, with payments in U.S. dollars or roubles.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> “Kim pledges ‘full support’ for Russia in Ukraine as Putin visits Pyongyang”, Aljazeera, published on June 19, 2024.

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/6/19/putin-flies-into-pyongyang-to-waiting-kim-and-red-carpet-welcome>

<sup>3</sup> Kim & Aggarwal, “Kim Jong Un takes his relationship with Putin – and maybe his nuclear program – to a new level”, NBC News, published on June 20, 2024.

<https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/kim-jong-un-putin-north-korea-russia-mutual-defense-pact-rcna157903>

<sup>4</sup> “‘Axis of impunity’: How Putin-Kim deal could challenge existing world order”, Aljazeera, published on June 24, 2024.

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/6/26/axis-of-impunity-putin-kim-deal-underlines-new-challenges-to-world-order>

<sup>5</sup> “Russia’s Vladimir Putin visits North Korea for the first time since 2000”, Aljazeera, published on June 19, 2024.

<https://www.aljazeera.com/gallery/2024/6/19/russias-vladimir-putin-visits-north-korea-for-first-time-since-2000>

<sup>6</sup> Ryan Shih, “Analysts see Putin’s visit to North Korea as a problem for China”, Voice of America (VOA), published on June 21, 2024.

<https://www.voanews.com/a/analysts-see-putin-s-visit-to-north-korea-as-a-problem-for-china/7664754.html>

- **Transportation Projects:** Discussions included reviving and expanding transportation links, such as modernizing railways and developing port facilities to boost trade and economic integration.

### 3. Military and Security Collaboration:

- **Arms and Technology Transfer:** One significant aspect of the visit was the discussion on military cooperation. Reports suggest North Korea may seek advanced Russian military technology in exchange for providing manpower for Russian industrial projects.
- **Strategic Alignment:** The visit reinforced the strategic alignment between the two countries, with both leaders emphasizing the need for a multipolar world order and mutual support against Western sanctions. President Putin stated that the new agreement was defensive in nature.<sup>7</sup>

### 4. Diplomatic Significance:

- **Regional Influence:** The visit signals Russia's intent to play a more active role in East Asian geopolitics. Strengthening ties with North Korea aims to counterbalance the presence of the United States and its allies in the region. It comes as tensions remain high on the Korean Peninsula, where Kim in recent months has ramped up bellicose language and scrapped a longstanding policy of seeking peaceful reunification with South Korea amid alarm in Pyongyang over tightening coordination between the U.S., South Korea, and Japan.<sup>8</sup>
- **North Korea's positioning:** For North Korea, the visit is a diplomatic win, providing it with greater leverage in its dealings with major powers, particularly China and the United States. Kim Jong-un described the deal as an "alliance" and declared Russia his country's "most honest friend and ally."<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Smith & Park, "Russia's Putin and North Korea's Kim sign mutual defence pact", Reuters, published on June 20, 2024.  
<https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/putin-kim-agree-develop-strategic-fortress-relations-kcna-says-2024-06-18/>

<sup>8</sup> McCarthy, Suri, Lilieholm & Gigova, "Putin says Russia and North Korea will help each other if attacked, taking ties to a new level", CNN, published on June 19, 2024.  
<https://edition.cnn.com/2024/06/19/asia/north-korea-russia-putin-visit-thursday-intl-hnk/index.html>

<sup>9</sup> "Pact with North Korea will protect us both from aggression, says Putin", BBC, published on June 18, 2024.  
<https://www.bbc.com/news/live/world-asia-69124350/page/2>

## Strategic Implications:

### 1. Regional Security Dynamics:

- The strengthened Russia-North Korea axis may complicate efforts to denuclearize the Korean Peninsula. It could lead to a more assertive North Korea, emboldened by Russian support. Tensions on the Korean Peninsula have risen amid weapons tests in North Korea and large-scale military exercises in South Korea.<sup>10</sup>
- The visit could prompt reactions from other regional players, notably South Korea and Japan, leading to an arms race or increased military posturing in the region.

### 2. Global Geopolitical Shifts:

- This visit is part of a broader pattern of Russia seeking new alliances and strengthening existing ones amidst its strained relations with the West. It reflects a shift towards a more multipolar global order where traditional alliances are being re-evaluated.
- The collaboration between Russia and DPRK under heavy sanctions might lead to new methods of circumventing these sanctions, challenging the effectiveness of international punitive measures. Despite all the rhetoric surrounding it, the Russia-DPRK relationship seems like a wartime partnership. It may develop but, for now, it appears transactional, even as they upgrade their partnership to the level of "alliance".<sup>11</sup>

## Challenges and Concerns:

- **Human Rights Issues:** The visit has drawn criticism from human rights organizations, given North Korea's public image and reported human rights record. Enhanced cooperation might lead to increased scrutiny and criticism from the international community.
- **Economic Viability:** Despite the potential for increased economic cooperation, the actual implementation of large-scale projects may face significant hurdles, including funding, technical challenges, and political instability. Under UN sanctions, Pyongyang is limited to

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<sup>10</sup> "North Korea says drills by South Korea, US and Japan show nations have developed 'Asian Nato'", The Guardian, published on June 29, 2024.  
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/jun/29/north-korea-condemns-joint-military-exercise-by-south-korea-us-and-japan>

<sup>11</sup> "China is the true power in Putin and Kim's budding friendship", Ratopati published for BBC, published on June 20, 2024.  
<https://english.ratopati.com/story/32829>

importing 4 million barrels of crude and 500,000 barrels of refined products a year.<sup>12</sup> Russia has vetoed efforts to keep a team of United Nations experts in Mali who had accused foreign fighters. Sanctions were first put in place in 2017 to support a peace agreement in the long-troubled country.<sup>13</sup>

### Recent Developments:

- **U.S. Response:** The United States and its regional allies in the Asia Pacific have strongly condemned the newly announced military 'alliance' between Russia and North Korea.<sup>14</sup> The U.S. State Department reported that North Korea had "unlawfully transferred dozens of ballistic missiles and over 11,000 containers of munitions to aid Russia's war effort" in recent months.<sup>15</sup>
- **North Korean Support in Ukraine:** Reports suggest that Pyongyang will take an unprecedented step by sending construction and engineering forces to occupied territories of Ukraine from July to assist in rebuilding work.<sup>16</sup>

**Conclusion:** President Putin's visit to North Korea represents a pivotal moment in East Asian geopolitics, signalling a potential shift in regional alliances and strategic calculations. While the visit holds promise for enhanced bilateral cooperation, it also raises significant strategic and humanitarian concerns. The evolving Russia-North Korea relationship will be a critical factor to watch in the coming years, with implications that extend far beyond the immediate region.

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<sup>12</sup> "Russia blocks renewal of UN panel monitoring North Korea sanctions", Aljazeera, published on March 29, 2024.

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/3/29/russia-blocks-renewal-of-un-panel-monitoring-n-korea-sanction-compliance>

<sup>13</sup> "Russia vetoes UN resolution to extend sanctions, monitoring in Mali", Aljazeera, published on August 31, 2023.

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/8/31/russia-vetoes-un-resolution-to-extend-sanctions-monitoring-in-mali>

<sup>14</sup> "US and allies in war of words with Russian-North Korean alliance", Aljazeera, published on June 24, 2024.

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/6/24/us-and-allies-in-war-of-words-with-russian-north-korean-alliance>

<sup>15</sup> "'Axis of impunity': How Putin-Kim deal could challenge existing world order", Aljazeera, published on June 24, 2024.

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/6/26/axis-of-impunity-putin-kim-deal-underlines-new-challenges-to-world-order>

<sup>16</sup> James Reynolds, "North Korea 'will send military personnel to Ukraine within a month' to boost Putin's forces – as Pyongyang warns of a 'new world war' after US aircraft carrier's arrival in the South", The Daily Mail, published on June 27, 2024.

<https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-13575163/north-korea-military-personnel-russia-world-war-ukraine.html>