

Putin's Strategic Pivot with North Korea and Its Implications

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Introduction

On Jun 19, 2024, President Vladimir Putin completed a state visit to the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea). This visit was notable for signing a significant agreement, 'The strongest ever treaty', that redefined and elevated bilateral relations between Russia and North Korea to a 'Comprehensive strategic level', comparable to an alliance.ⁱ It marked Putin's first formal trip to the isolated country (North Korea) in 24 years, his last being in 2000 for a summit with Kim Jong Il, the father of North Korea's current leader, Kim Jong Un.

The new comprehensive partnership agreement includes political, military, economic, and cultural cooperation based on mutual respect for sovereignty, nonviolence, non-interference, and equality. This strengthened collaboration supersedes previous agreements made in 1961, 2000, and 2001, which included varied degrees of military and economic assistance from Russia. However, these old ties had cooled by the end of the Cold War, highlighting the significance of the renewed commitment.ⁱⁱ

The timing of this alliance is particularly interesting. Russia faced increasing isolation due to United States (US) and G7 sanctions imposed in response to the ongoing conflict with Ukraine. These sanctions have had a negative effect on Russia's economy and have frozen its assets. Similarly, North Korea has long been isolated due to its nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programmes, which prompted the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) to impose sanctionsⁱⁱⁱ. This shared experience of international isolation seems to have driven them to cooperate in health, education, and science, even committing to mutual military support. This new collaboration and cooperation challenge the traditional dynamic in which China has significantly influenced North Korea.

Win-Win Agreement

To further their strategic alliance and achieve mutual benefit, Russia and North Korea have outlined their cooperation in a detailed agreement. It emphasises equal rights in network management, tackling modern security issues (such as combating terrorism, transnational crimes, and information security), regional and cross-border economic cooperation, and a commitment to disseminate factual information and thwart false propaganda.^{iv} This agreement provision emphasises a cooperative effort to strengthen internal stability and fend off outside pressures.

The most eye-catching clause, however, is the promise of mutual military assistance in case of 'Aggression or forced war'. This provision serves a dual purpose, deterring foreign threats, particularly from Western nations and solidifying their newfound military alliance.

North Korea, which has been severely damaged by Western sanctions and is in desperate need of basic supplies like food and gasoline, is one country for whom this help is especially important. Russia offers a mutually advantageous collaboration opportunity as a significant energy provider and a prominent worldwide exporter of wheat. Furthermore, the sanctions regime's major gap is filled by Russia's capacity to provide North Korea with crucial military technology. Russia can also leverage its position as a permanent member of the UNSC by using its veto power to block resolutions against North Korea.

By working together, both nations intend to get over Western sanctions and impact the creation of a new Asian security framework that serves their needs. Putin is using this coalition as a tactical move as well.^v He wants to undermine US dominance in the Pacific by forging closer connections with North Korea and establishing a potent barrier against US influence. In addition to fortifying his bilateral ties with North Korea, Putin's bold action upends the current dynamics of international security and may present new difficulties.

Global Implications

While collaboration and mutual gain are promised, the global reality paints a far more alarming image. This agreement has enormous worldwide implications, especially for the Northeast Asia region.

Because of North Korea's enhanced nuclear capabilities under Russian protection, South Korea and Japan see the deal as a direct security threat. Reviving a defence pact from the Cold War era puts further pressure on these countries, raising tensions in the area and splitting the democratic alliance of the US, South Korea, and Japan from the autocratic bloc, including China, North Korea, and Russia.^{vi} Thus, it will exacerbate instability in the area and spark an arms race, undermining international attempts to curb North Korea's nuclear and missile development.

In response to the perceived threat, Japan and South Korea are bolstering their defences and alliances. The arrangement upset South Korea, which has criticised it and underlined that any cooperation strengthening North Korea's military power is prohibited. They are increasing defence ties with the US and Japan and reconsidering their support for Ukraine. This might entail purchasing cutting-edge weapons, increasing military funding, and participating in cooperative exercises and information-sharing initiatives.^{vii}

The agreement between Russia and North Korea has also raised concerns about nuclear proliferation because it could result in a risky acceleration of both nations' weapons development. North Korea might supply Russia with munitions, and Russia might provide cutting-edge support for North Korea's nuclear and missile programmes, including the development of ballistic missile submarines. This cooperation might expedite North Korea's nuclear programme, posing a serious global threat, and it establishes a precedent for authoritarian governments to cooperate against Western liberal orders.

A revitalised arms race on the Korean peninsula, fuelled by North Korea's recent actions, necessitates a strong, unified international response to prevent regional destabilisation. Sharing a land border with both North Korea and Russia, China finds itself geographically positioned at the centre of this geopolitical shift. The pact weakens China's hitherto dominant influence over North Korea, potentially prompting Pyongyang to recalibrate its strategic alignment. This may strain the China-Russia 'Strategic Partnership', as their shared goal of countering US influence might diverge over their preferred outcomes on the Korean Peninsula. China faces a difficult calculus, how to navigate its relationship with a potentially emboldened North Korea while preventing a power shift towards Russia and exacerbating regional instability.

Recommendations

The alliance between North Korea and Russia indicates a severe threat to the international system based on norms, which has democratic countries re-evaluating their strategic posture. The United States and its allies in Europe and Asia must strengthen their ties to offset this danger successfully. The first steps towards cohesive unity may be seen in recent actions like coordinating sanctions on Russia while supporting Ukraine and including allies from the Pacific in North Atlantic Treaty Organisation meetings.^{viii}

Nonetheless, a cautious approach is shown by South Korea and Japan's reluctance to offer direct military help to Ukraine while making indirect contributions. Their hesitation is probably due to worries about regional security, as Russia's increased backing of North Korea might have unintended consequences. However, increasing military aid to Ukraine may be a strong reaction, consistent with Australia's initiative to offer direct military help.

Regarding domestic geopolitical concerns, Israel's position during the crisis in Ukraine differs significantly from that of other democracies. While limited in military contributions due to regional conflicts, Israel's participation in sanctioning Russia would underscore global democratic unity against autocratic alliances. Such actions uphold the rules-based international system while simultaneously denouncing Russian provocations.^{ix}

When facing a coalition of illiberal countries, democracies must be just as resolute as their opponents. This entails using diplomatic channels to isolate adversarial alliances, enforcing international sanctions, and strengthening collective defence mechanisms. Democratic states can preserve the values of sovereignty, security, and international order in the face of escalating difficulties by uniting against threats to global stability.

End Notes

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