

MP-IDSA *Commentary*

Surge in North Korea–Russia Relations: Chinese Reactions

Mayuri Banerjee

January 13, 2025

S*ummary*

Chinese analysts perceive a lack of long-term strategic convergence between Moscow and Pyongyang despite the current momentum in bilateral ties.

Introduction

The surge in Russia–North Korea relations has been one of the major highlights of international geopolitical developments in recent times. With high-level state visits and the signing of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Agreement in June 2024, Pyongyang and Moscow have rapidly expanded their cooperation in trade, technology, defence and security. They have most importantly committed to mutual assistance in an event of aggression against the other.¹ Commentators in the West have speculated that the strengthening of the North Korea–Russia ties has irked Beijing which sees Russia’s expanding influence in the Korean Peninsula at China’s cost.² They note that Beijing may be concerned about consolidation of South Korea–Japan and US alliance as a response to this development.³

The Chinese Foreign Ministry has however refrained from expressing disapproval, asserting it to be sovereign right of the two countries to cultivate diplomatic ties.⁴ Discussions in Chinese media (heavily controlled by the party-state), meanwhile, offer an additional glimpse of interpretation by analysts of this evolving dynamic. Analysts posit that the strengthening of North Korea–Russia relations is driven by the current international situation rather than signifying convergence of long-term strategic interests. Also, it is noted that although Russia–North Korea have upgraded their ties, the cooperation between the two powers remains limited and does not threaten China’s position in the Korean Peninsula.

Chinese Media Observations

A section of Chinese commentators have attributed the turn in North Korea–Russia relations to the challenging external environment facing the two countries. Close bilateral ties are being driven by the complex geopolitical and security environment that the two countries currently face.⁵ For Moscow, strained diplomatic and

¹ Jeongmin Kim and Joon Ha Park, [“Full text: North Korea’s New ‘Comprehensive Strategic Partnership’ With Russia”](#), *NK Pro*, 20 June 2024.

² Ramesh Ramachandran, [“Why Russia – North Korea Friendship Upsets China”](#), *DD News*, 17 November 2024.

³ Ibid.

⁴ [“Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Mao Ning’s Regular Press Conference on January 10, 2024”](#), Foreign Ministry Spokesperson’s Remarks, Permanent Mission of the People’s Republic of China to the UN, 10 January 2024; [“Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Lin Jian’s Regular Press Conference on June 17, 2024”](#), Foreign Ministry Spokesperson’s Remarks, Permanent Mission of the People’s Republic of China to the UN, 17 June 2024; [“Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Lin Jian’s Regular Press Conference on October 30, 2024”](#), Spokesperson’s Remarks, Regular Press Conferences, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, The People’s Republic of China, 30 October 2024. Also see [“Relations between Russia and North Korea have ushered in great changes, and the two countries cannot sit still at all, and a Ukrainian special plane urgently landed in Seoul”](#), *Sohu.com*, 2 December 2024.

⁵ [“Why were the Soviet Union and Russia so generous to North Korea, the ‘True’ Allies Maintained by Money?”](#), *Toutiao.com*, 21 November 2024; Zhao Long and Lian Jiaxuan, “Russia and North Korea build ‘all-round’ Relations: Driving Logic, Spillover Effects and Structural Shortcomings”, *International Relations*, Issue 6, 2023; [“Why is North Korea, which is closer to our country, deeply](#)

economic ties with Western powers has not only hindered the economy but has also significantly altered its geopolitical environment.

Russia’s capability to gain international leverage has been severely constrained due to unprecedented sanctions from the West and limits on senior Russian military and civilian officials to travel internationally or participate in diplomatic gatherings.⁶ Furthermore, the West’s continued military, diplomatic and economic support to Ukraine has created considerable military pressure on Russia to combat the combined effort of the Western powers.

Similarly, for Pyongyang, owing to years of economic and technological sanctions and restrictions in participating in global trade imposed by the Western powers, it does not have a very favourable external environment. Additionally, North Korea’s threat perception has also heightened, especially with increased military cooperation between the US and South Korea amidst stalled talks between Pyongyang and Washington.⁷ Chinese observers contend that hostility with the West has created a sense of common interests. The two countries perceive it as convenient to jointly resist the geostrategic and security threat posed by the West. According to them, it is almost natural that the two countries will band together.⁸

However, Chinese observers argue that even with their efforts to develop an “all-round partnership”, the trajectory of Russia–North Korea relations continue to be dependent on external regional and international situation and lacks substantive interests that can sustain bilateral ties in the long run.⁹ In the post-Cold War period, Moscow shifted diplomatic attention to South Korea and supported sanctions against North Korea.

Chinese analysts argue that the reciprocal relationship between the two countries is likely to change with shifts in relations between Russia and the Western powers. Russia’s ability and willingness to intervene in the Korean peninsula could be limited as it tries to reach an understanding with the West, thus changing the dynamics between Russia and North Korea.¹⁰ Further, Russia’s economic, political and cultural

[tied to Russia?](#)”, *Sohu.com*, 24 December 2024; [“Putin’s Visit to North Korea and Vietnam is Worth Paying Attention To”](#), *Xinhuanet*, 19 June 2024.

⁶ Feng Yujun, [“The Origin, Prospect and Strategic Impact of the Russia-Ukraine War”](#), *Aisixiang*, 21 May 2022.

⁷ [“What is the Relationship between North Korea and Russia? Have You Always Been Intimate? Truth Subverts Cognition”](#), *Toutiao.com*, 4 October 2023.

⁸ Tian Liu Talk, [“Russia-North Korea Relations are Upgrading”](#), *Toutiao.com*, 20 June 2024.

⁹ Zhao Long and Lian Jiakuan, “Russia and North Korea build ‘all-round’ Relations: Driving Logic, Spillover Effects and Structural Shortcomings”, no. 5.

¹⁰ Ibid. Chinese analysts contend that Russia has never defined its relationship with the West as purely hostile. For instance, President Putin said in a speech at the 2022 Valdai Forum that “Russia has never positioned itself as an enemy of the West and has been trying its best to improve relations with Western countries”. Further, in his 2024 presidential inauguration speech, Putin also proposed that Russia did not refuse to dialogue with the West, but the premise was equality and respect for each other’s interests. The new version of the ‘Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation’ also proposed that Russia hopes to maintain a strategic balance with the US and coexist peacefully with the US. These claims are considered by Chinese observers as proof of Russia’s intent to seek an understanding with the West.

interests are largely based in Europe and Moscow considers itself a European rather than an Asian power.

Similarly, while acknowledging that the signing of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Agreement and North Korea’s military support to Russia indicates an upgrade, analysts in Chinese media emphasise the limitations of this cooperation.¹¹ They express that the Russia–North Korea relations which had become nearly stagnant in 2020, revived only after the outbreak of the Ukraine war as the two countries aligned with each other against US pressure. Even so, Chinese commentators feel, this cooperation is constrained by number of factors. For instance, despite proclaiming “all-round partnership”, Moscow has hinted that Russia will abide by the UN sanctions. President Vladimir Putin in a public address in September 2024 observed that Russia–North Korea relations have some restrictions and Russia must abide by these restrictions.¹²

Therefore, even if Russia transfers weapons or provides technical assistance to North Korea, it is unlikely to provide nuclear technology to North Korea violating UN sanctions.¹³ Further, the two countries differ in their interpretation of the treaty—while North Korea uses the term ‘alliance’, Russia continues to use the term ‘partnership’ which is ranked lower than alliance in Russia’s diplomatic discourse.¹⁴ Besides, due to North Korea’s low economic and technological capability, there are very few things that Pyongyang can sell to Russia.¹⁵

Chinese analysts opine that North Korea is unlikely to be able to supply key raw materials and equipment such as electronic components, electromechanical products, automobiles and transportation equipment, and chemical products that Russia urgently needs.¹⁶ Likewise, the weapons and military equipment that North Korea has sent to Russia are not high-end equipment but large quantities of artillery shells and anti-tank rockets. Once the Russia–Ukraine conflict ends, Russia’s

Zhao Long, [“Russia's Diplomacy ‘Shifting Eastward and Advancing Southward’ is Accelerating”](#), *Global Times*, 20 June 2024.

¹¹ Li Min, [“Russia’s Policy Balance is Accelerating Between North Korea and South Korea”](#), *CIIS*, 2 January 2024.

¹² The Chinese state-media also reported President Putin’s statement at the 21st Annual Plenary Session of the Valdai International Discussion Club that the document “actually contains nothing new” and that the two sides have returned to the treaty concluded during the Soviet era. [“Putin: Putting Pressure on Russia is Futile Russia is Willing to Negotiate on The Condition of Taking into Account Each Other's Legitimate Interests”](#), *CCTV News, China.com.cn*, 8 November 2024.

¹³ [“Putin Revisits North Korea After 24 years, ‘Signed Breakthrough Document’”](#), *Southern Weekend, Sina.cn*; Wang Jiahao, [“The Fiction and Reality of the Putin-Kim Meeting: A Geopolitical Interpretation of Northeast Asia”](#), *Lianhe Zaobao*, 18 September 2023.

¹⁴ Hao Junfeng and Wang Fudong, [“Putin Visits North Korea, Northeast Asia's Regional Situation is Changing Rapidly”](#), *China.com*, 20 June 2024.

¹⁵ [“If North Korea Really Provides Military Aid to Russia, How Big a Wave Can It Cause?”](#), *NetEase*, 9 November 2024. One commentator noted that North Korea’s help to Russia is like sending small amount of charcoal in the heavy snow. Although it is not enough to completely warm the whole of Russia, it only warms the heart of the Russians. [“Russia and North Korea are Getting Closer and Fighting Each Other! Will We be Forced into War Again?”](#), *NetEase*, 24 October 2024.

¹⁶ Zhao Long and Lian Jiaxuan, “Russia and North Korea build ‘all-round’ Relations: Driving Logic, Spillover Effects and Structural Shortcomings”, no. 5.

demand for North Korean weapons will drop significantly, changing Pyongyang’s position in Moscow’s diplomatic chessboard.¹⁷

In this context, Chinese observers speculate that North Korea’s present turn to Russia is a bid to reduce its over-reliance on Chinese economic and political support.¹⁸ It is also argued that Pyongyang possibly is uncomfortable with China’s increasing influence in North East Asia and intends to leverage its ties with Russia to expand North Korea’s influence.¹⁹ However, as Beijing continues to be a major partner for both North Korea and Russia in terms of aid and trade, China will be able to exert control on the developments in the Korean Peninsula.²⁰

Nonetheless, some analysts have expressed concern on a range of issues. They opine that the growing strategic cooperation between Russia and North Korea can result in the formation of an Asian NATO, increase friction between Seoul and Pyongyang and affect the strategic stability of the region in the long run. However, China is argued to be in a position to prevent significant escalation that would undermine Chinese interests.

Conclusion

Since 2017–2018, China and Russia have cooperated closely on North Korea. As observers note, the security threat perceived from the US military presence and diplomatic influence in the Korean Peninsula has been a major factor in Sino-Russian cooperation in the region. It is noteworthy that Russia in the past played largely a supporting role to Chinese initiatives. However, with the outbreak of the Ukraine war and significant warming up of North Korea–Russia relations, there are concerns whether Moscow is trying to carve out a more independent position in its strategic backyard which will overshadow China’s position.

While Beijing’s official response to the developments visibly has been muted, analysts perceive a lack of strategic convergence between the two countries which would sustain the momentum in the long run. Further, the scale of cooperation is deemed to be low due to various restrictions and low complementarity between the two economies. Finally, it is also flagged that China remains a major partner for both Russia and North Korea giving it a pivotal position to shape regional dynamics.

¹⁷ [“Why is Russia, Not China, North Korea's First Choice for Cooperation? Kim Jong-un Gives the Answer Himself”](#), *NetEase*, 2 July 2024; Qin Zhen, [“North Korea Spared No Effort to Send Troops to Help, and Russia was also Unambiguous in its Gratitude”](#), *NetEase*, 27 November 2024.

¹⁸ [“How Did Russia and North Korea Evolve From ‘Ignoring Each Other’ to ‘Comprehensive Strategic Partners’?”](#), *Toutiao.com*, 21 October 2024.

¹⁹ [“Why is North Korea, Which is Closer to My Country, Deeply Bound to Russia?”](#), *Toutiao.com*, 24 December 2024.

²⁰ Tian Liu Talk, [“Russia-North Korea Relations are Upgrading”](#), *Toutiao.com*, 20 June 2024; [“North Korea Hosted Banquet For Many Countries, But Why China Was Not Included”](#), *NetEase*, 5 August 2024; Tian Liu Talk, [“North Korea Told Putin: Will Support Russia Until Victory”](#), *Tencent News*, 4 November 2024; [“Xi Jinping Does Not Want to ‘Huddle Together’ and Watch Russia and North Korea Get Closer and Closer”](#), *BackChina.com*, 21 June 2024.

About the Author



Ms. Mayuri Banerjee is Research Analyst at the Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, New Delhi.

Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses is a non-partisan, autonomous body dedicated to objective research and policy relevant studies on all aspects of defence and security. Its mission is to promote national and international security through the generation and dissemination of knowledge on defence and security-related issues.

Disclaimer: Views expressed in Manohar Parrikar IDSA's publications and on its website are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Manohar Parrikar IDSA or the Government of India.

© Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (MP-IDSA) 2025