North Korea-Russia relations: Recent trends

On 13 September 2023, Kim Jong-un, leader of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK or North Korea), met with President Putin at the Vostochny Cosmodrome (spaceport) in the Amur region in Russia’s far east. Although very little is known about what they discussed, many observers assume that one of the topics involved hammering out the details of a deal whereby North Korea would help Russia replenish its stocks of artillery shells and send a considerable number of workers to staff Russian factories, in return for humanitarian aid – more specifically food – from Moscow, as well as Russia’s support for Pyonyang’s space programme. Experts also agree that a more far-reaching alignment could be in the making.

Historical background
Ever since the establishment of the (supposedly) Soviet-friendly regime of Kim Il-sung in the northern part of the Korean peninsula in 1948, relations between North Korea and what was initially the Soviet Union and then the Russian Federation have gone from excellent to indifferent and back to (very) good again. Relations reached their absolute low after the demise of the Soviet Union in 1991. However, almost as soon as he became president in 2000, Vladimir Putin started working on re-intensifying bilateral ties. At the UN Security Council, up until 2017 Russia regularly supported sanctions on North Korea’s nuclear and missiles programmes. Bilateral economic relations are very underdeveloped, not least because China accounts for more than 90% of North Korea’s very limited trade (slightly more than US$ 1 billion in 2022).

The known facts
On 13 September 2023, Russian President Vladimir Putin welcomed North Korea’s leader Kim Jong-Un to Vostochny Cosmodrome in Russia’s far east (around 1 500 km north of Vladivostok). The previous day, Putin had delivered a speech at the annual Eastern Economic Forum in Vladivostok (around 150 km from the North Korean border). Vladivostok was also where the previous summit between the two leaders had taken place on 25 April 2019. According to the South Korean daily Hankyoreh, Kim’s entourage included Jo Chun-ryong, Director of the Munitions Industry Department, Park Thae-song, Chair of the National Space Science and Technology Committee, and Kim Myong-sik, Commander of the Navy. Putin’s delegation included Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu.

After the talks, Putin signalled that Russia intended to help North Korea develop its space programme (following North Korea’s two failed attempts to launch spy satellites), and that the topics of economic cooperation and humanitarian issues had been touched upon during the talks. Putin is also quoted as saying that there were ‘possibilities’ for cooperation between the two countries in the military field, while emphasising that Russia would ‘observe’ its international obligations. On 13 September, Russia announced that China’s Foreign Minister Wang Yi would visit Moscow on 18 September for talks with Lavrov.

Likely points of discussion
Ahead of the meeting, Western media reported that the two sides were close to a deal. North Korea would deliver artillery shells (and possibly short-range missiles) compatible with Russia’s military equipment, while Russia would support its space and missile programmes. Moscow would also provide Pyonyang with humanitarian aid, including food. Putin himself has mentioned ‘possible military cooperation’; the makeup of the North Korean delegation and the programme of Kim’s visit, which included a visit to defence and civil aviation factories in Komsomolsk-on-Amur, suggest military cooperation was indeed on the agenda.

Overall, little reliable information on the content of the talks is available, as there was no press conference or communiqué. Analysts and media have come up with two main scenarios. Under the first, the sides agreed on a ‘pragmatic’ approach allowing them to meet their most basic challenges without creating major additional global strains. Under the second, bilateral cooperation would go much further and would considerably affect China, with unforeseeable global consequences, such as a potentially long-lasting war.
in Ukraine or a disruption of the international non-proliferation system. A third scenario, suggesting that the meeting served primarily as a show, cannot be ruled out altogether.

**Scenario I: 'Basic' cooperation**

Under this scenario, North Korea would deliver relatively basic arms – in particular, artillery shells that are likely compatible with Russian arms – to Russia. These seem to be mostly of poor quality – according to *The Economist*, 20% of the shells North Korea used against a South Korean island in 2010 did not detonate. Yet, their sheer number – *La Repubblica* says North Korea has tens of millions of shells and Russia is now using around 20,000 shells a day – would still enable Russia to prolong its attacks for many months. Furthermore, *Le Monde* reports that Kim Jong-un has paid frequent visits to ammunition factories in recent months.

In exchange, Russia would deliver humanitarian aid, in particular food supplies, to North Korea. According to the BBC, the country's food situation is the worst since the 1990s.

North Korea would also send thousands of workers to Russian factories, which are increasingly facing staff shortages. *Le Monde* points out that on 6 September 2023, the Russian government contacted around 100 Russian companies to find out what their human resource needs were. In the past, North Korea would receive posted workers’ salaries in major Western currencies. This money would then primarily be used to buy Western goods for consumption by the Kim family and to buy the loyalty of the North Korean elite. China – which has its only defence alliance with North Korea and is the latter’s key trading partner – could probably accept such a deal, among other things because the provision of shells could contribute to a prolongation of the war in Ukraine, thus buying China time to wait for the outcome of the next US presidential election.

**Scenario II: 'No-limits' partnership**

During Kim’s visit, he and Putin reportedly also held a 30-minute conversation ‘without other ministers’, presumably to avoid leaks, primarily to the United States (US), and to discuss sensitive issues such as Russian technological support for North Korea’s ballistic and nuclear programme, including for the launch of satellites. It should be noted that at the Party Congress in January 2021, Kim ‘ordered his government’ to develop super-large nuclear warheads, tactical nuclear weapons, hypersonic missiles, nuclear-powered submarines and spy satellites. Russian support for North Korea’s ballistic and nuclear submarine programme would constitute a major change in Russia’s official position, given that the last time it agreed to onerous UN sanctions on North Korea’s ballistic and nuclear programmes was as recently as 2017.

At first sight, it does not appear obvious what North Korea could offer in exchange for such far-reaching military support. Putin, in his ‘interview’ quoted above, also spoke about cooperation on ‘railway and maritime ports in order to substantially increase trade flows’, thus dropping hints about the content of the discussions. While bilateral trade is currently close to non-existent, the outlook for Russia could be promising in some areas, given North Korea’s big deposits of minerals and critical raw materials, including lithium. These materials are also covered by the UN sanctions on North Korea.

A lot has been made of the somewhat surprising presence of Kim’s sister Kim Yo-yong in her brother’s delegation. Her presence could signal – given the recurrent rumours about Kim Jong-un’s state of health – that these medium- to long-term arrangements with Russia (‘a relationship with longevity’) would still be implemented should the sister succeed her brother at the helm.

China has a significant role in this scenario. It would probably not approve of such a blow against the UN sanctions regime and – more widely – against the global non-proliferation system, not least because of concerns about rising uncertainty in northeast Asia that would directly affect China’s periphery. This might explain why, during his trip to Russia, Kim was quoted as saying that North Korean-Russian ‘friendship has deep roots’ and ‘now relations with the Russian Federation are the very first priority’. At the same time, experts point out that North Korea has for a long time successfully focused on garnering support from its interlocutors through a mixture of threats and by playing China against Russia, while persistently advancing its ballistic and/or nuclear programmes.

Japan and South Korea have signalled their concern (and regret) about the Kim-Putin meeting. The US has stated that if the meeting results in an arms deal, the US would ‘deal with it appropriately’.

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