



Russia-DPRK Ties after 75th Anniversary of Diplomatic Relations: Hurdles and Opportunities

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Since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine on February 24, 2023, relations between Russia and North Korea (DPRK) have seen a swift and robust revival. This rapprochement follows a significant hiatus in exchanges due to North Korea's stringent border closures amid the COVID-19 pandemic. As the conflict in Ukraine unfolded, both nations have been vigorously working towards revitalizing and expediting the growth of their bilateral relations. A notable landmark in this rejuvenation was the Russia-DPRK summit, convened at the Vostochny Cosmodrome in the Russian Far East on September 13, 2023. This summit, commemorating the 75th anniversary of diplomatic ties between the two countries, not only symbolized the current state of their relations but also projected their future trajectory. With Moscow and Pyongyang increasingly aligning their strategic interests to foster a coalition against American and Western hegemony and to promote a multipolar world order, the progression and fortification of Russia-DPRK relations will likely continue unabated in the foreseeable future.

Since the summit on September 13, 2023, and the 75th anniversary of their diplomatic ties on October 12, 2023, Russia and North Korea have shown mutual support on various international and regional issues across political and diplomatic fronts, significantly increasing both high-level and working-level exchanges. For instance, North Korea has explicitly backed Russia in the Ukraine conflict and has criticized the U.S. for supplying Army Tactical Missile Systems (ATACMS) to Ukraine. Conversely, Russia has accused the United States and its allies of stalling the resolution of the North Korean nuclear issue and has vetoed a United Nations vote intended to extend the mandate of the panel of experts monitoring sanctions against North Korea.

There has also been a series of significant diplomatic visits, including trips by Russia's Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, Natural Resources Minister Alexandr Kozlov, and Foreign Intelligence Service Director Sergei Naryshkin, as well as North Korea's Sports Minister Kim Il Guk, Foreign Minister Choe Sun Hui, and Vice Premier Ri Chol Man. These visits underscore the dynamic interaction between the two nations. Additionally, Russia and North Korea have exchanged letters of

congratulations and condolences on various occasions, including in response to disasters and terrorist attacks. In a notable gesture of camaraderie, Putin presented Kim Jong Un with an AURUS, a Russian-made presidential vehicle.

On the political and diplomatic fronts, both countries are poised to further expand their bilateral exchanges, including those between parliaments and political party leaders. An anticipated milestone is Putin's reciprocal visit to North Korea, which is expected to significantly bolster the political and diplomatic ties between the two nations.

On the economic front, Russia and North Korea have been actively working to reinvigorate trade and establish a robust trade framework. They have revitalized various intergovernmental committees that had previously been dormant or suspended, utilizing these platforms to discuss critical aspects of future bilateral relationship development. A key event was the 10th meeting of the Intergovernmental Commission on Economic, Scientific, and Technical Cooperation, which took place during Kozlov's visit to the DPRK in November 2023. This meeting set the agenda for future cooperation in comprehensive fields such as trade, economy, science, and technology.

Additionally, efforts are underway to enhance existing transport links, including shipping, rail, and air routes for both cargo and passenger services. Discussions have also resumed on constructing a new car bridge at the border. Tourist exchanges have substantially increased, with organized visits by Russian tourists to North Korea commencing in February 2024, occurring five times to date. This period has also seen a marked increase in rail and shipping traffic, indicating a steady recovery and expansion of trade between the two nations.

Despite these advancements, the development of bilateral trade faces inherent constraints due to the structure and scale of trade between the two nations. This limitation has prompted Pyongyang and Moscow to consider a trilateral cooperation model that includes Beijing, which could serve as a more viable alternative for economic engagement. In the short term, there is potential for increased tourism cooperation and the deployment of North Korean workers. Over the medium to long term, strategic initiatives such as using Najin Port as a transit trade hub in line with China's "second port of call" strategy, and the development of commercial, trade, and infrastructure projects in the North-China-Russia border region, could be key areas of focus.

In the military and security domains, Moscow and North Korea have opted for and will continue to pursue a strategy of covert and discreet collaboration instead of transparent and overt approaches. At the September 13 summit, Moscow's decision to enhance military and security ties with Pyongyang was a strategic move designed to leverage the international community's and regional actors' concerns, thereby advancing its own strategic goals. Despite this, the Russia-DPRK military and security cooperation appears to be proceeding with caution.

Evidence suggests that North Korea has continued supplying expendable military equipment such as ammunition, shells, rockets, and launchers to Russia post-summit. However, both governments have strongly denied these allegations because they directly contravene international sanctions against North Korea. For the time being, it is anticipated that Russia and North Korea will navigate legal and moral gray areas, focusing on cooperation that does not explicitly breach United Nations (UN) Security Council sanctions. This includes activities like sharing technology for satellite

modernization, training and transporting North Korean astronauts, and conducting cyber operations targeting the U.S., the West, and South Korea (ROK).

Given the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, the arms trade between Russia and North Korea is likely to persist, though it will probably occur through private military contractors, such as the Wagner Group, or private entities, rather than through direct government dealings. Moreover, Russia will likely leverage the provision of technology and materials needed for strategic and tactical weapons—like inter-continental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), fighter jets, air defense systems, and nuclear submarines—as a bargaining chip in its dealings with the United States and to counter the ROK–U.S.-Japan trilateral cooperation.

As such, since the 75th anniversary of their diplomatic relations, Russia and North Korea have been intensifying exchanges and cooperation across various sectors such as politics, diplomacy, economy, trade, military, security, culture, and sports. Notably, the two parties have adopted differentiated strategies across non-sanctioned, gray-zone, and sanctioned domains.

On the other hand, in non-sanctioned areas—such as politics, economy, culture, and sports—Moscow and Pyongyang have actively restored and are looking to further enhance cooperation. However, activities within gray-zone areas of the economy, as well as military and security sectors, along with those that are sanctionable, are marked by secrecy, denial, and reactive tactics. Both countries continue to discreetly engage in arms deals, consistently denying such actions unless incontrovertible evidence is presented. North Korea is particularly keen on Russian assistance to modernize its strategic weapons systems and update its aging conventional arsenal, including enhancing its ICBM capabilities. Moscow, however, is likely to maintain a cautious stance on direct commitments to such upgrades. Instead, it will aim to leverage the potential for military and security collaboration with Pyongyang as a strategic counterbalance and source of policy leverage against South Korea, the United States, Japan, and other nations.

Putin's potential upcoming visit to North Korea stands as a pivotal event in the evolving dynamics of Russia-North Korea relations. The timing of this visit will hinge on a complex interplay of factors, including ongoing developments in the Russia-Ukraine War, the geopolitical climate on the Korean Peninsula, Russia's strategic foreign policy objectives, the necessity to navigate Russia-South Korea relations, Putin's own travel commitments, and significant bilateral anniversaries. Key moments likely to influence the scheduling of the summit include the 24th anniversary of Putin's initial visit to Pyongyang, North Korea's Victory Day in July, the first anniversary of the Eastern Economic Forum and the September 13 Summit in September, and the Belt and Road Forum in October. Additionally, Putin's engagements in the Far East or visits to China may also align with the summit's planning. Moreover, Russia and North Korea might time their summit to subtly impact the U.S. presidential elections, using the event as a strategic lever. The spectacle of a high-profile Russia-North Korea summit could serve as fodder in political narratives, potentially being used by former President Trump to slam President Biden's policies towards Russia and North Korea. This strategic timing reflects the intricate web of international relations and the tactical use of diplomatic engagements as tools of broader geopolitical influence.

The agenda for the summit will likely focus on a shared understanding of both international and regional dynamics, specifically concerning Northeast Asia and the Korean Peninsula. The goal

will be to either restore or enhance bilateral relations and to develop a comprehensive roadmap and action plan aimed at strengthening these ties. Unlike the September 13 summit, it is anticipated that the two parties will agree to and publicly announce a joint declaration. As both Russia and North Korea have expressed interest in reestablishing their bilateral relations on a “new legal basis,” there is a possibility that the existing bilateral relations treaty might be revised and upgraded during Putin’s visit. The level of commitment and the nature of the bilateral ties that Moscow and Pyongyang aim to achieve remains a key point of interest. At this juncture, both moderate and radical approaches to this relationship are conceivable.

First, Russia and North Korea may introduce the notion of a “partnership,” a common framework used to characterize bilateral relations in contemporary international affairs. Russia currently maintains a “strategic partnership” with South Korea and a “comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination for a new era” with China. Therefore, it is presumable that during the upcoming summit, both nations could adopt a modern partnership model that alters the form of their relationship without significantly expanding their binding mutual responsibilities. This change would primarily be symbolic rather than substantive. Adopting a “strategic” partnership, which represents the highest level of bilateral relations, would carry significant political importance and symbolism for both nations.

Second, Moscow and Pyongyang could escalate their relationship to include a commitment for “mutual defense,” reminiscent of their Cold War alliances. This would entail replacing the current Russia-DPRK “Treaty on Friendship, Good Neighborliness, and Cooperation” with a new “Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Assistance.” Russia is already engaged in military and security cooperation globally through various treaties and agreements. However, Armenia stands out as the sole nation with which Russia has a treaty explicitly providing for mutual assistance, commonly referred to as mutual defense. Should Russia and North Korea formalize such a “Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Assistance” during the forthcoming summit, it could dramatically impact the geopolitical landscape in Northeast Asia and the Korean Peninsula, and reverberate across global international relations, signaling a significant shift in regional power dynamics and alliances.

Considering the dynamics of Russia-DPRK relations since the 75th anniversary of their diplomatic ties and the current attitudes of both Moscow and Pyongyang, a gradual evolution in bilateral relations appears more likely than a radical overhaul. Indeed, even if a reciprocal visit by Putin to North Korea were to occur soon, it remains improbable that the two parties would engage in such drastic actions as signing a mutual defense treaty, unilaterally lifting Russia’s sanctions against North Korea, officially recognizing North Korea’s nuclear capabilities, engaging in bilateral nuclear cooperation, transferring advanced nuclear and missile technology, or forming a trilateral military alliance. Such cautious progression is informed by the complex international and regional context, the potential negative repercussions for Russia, and China’s ambivalent and careful stance. These factors suggest that both nations are likely to pursue a more measured and strategic approach to enhancing their relationship, mindful of the broader geopolitical implications.

Regardless, the Russia-DPRK summit will undoubtedly present significant challenges for South Korea, necessitating a meticulous analysis of the current state of rapprochement and an objective forecast of future developments. In response, the South Korean government must prepare

tailored strategies for various potential scenarios. A critical priority should be for the ROK to proactively issue warnings to Moscow and Pyongyang regarding their collaboration on nuclear and advanced weapons technologies. It is essential to highlight Russia's responsibilities as a permanent member of the UN Security Council, committed to upholding and strengthening the nuclear nonproliferation treaty (NPT) regime, and as a nation that has supported all UN sanctions against North Korea.

Moreover, South Korea must be cautious not to provide Russia with any pretext for taking radical and potentially harmful actions on highly sensitive matters, such as supplying nuclear and ICBM-related technology and components to North Korea. Concurrently, South Korea should adopt a conservative approach to actions that could severely worsen ROK-Russia relations. This includes avoiding direct support for offensive weaponry to Ukraine, which could escalate tensions and lead to significant diplomatic fallout. ■

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