



ANALYSIS

ASIA'S FALLOUT FROM RUSSIA'S WAR AGAINST UKRAINE NORTH KOREA'S RISE IN THE RUSSIA-CHINA BALANCE

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INTRODUCTION

The Ninth Congress of the Korean Workers' Party, a gathering held once every five years, offered Kim Jong-un an opportunity to showcase achievements under the 2021 "Five-Year Plan for the Development of Defence Science and Weapon Systems." Five years ago, when Russia-North Korea relations were low-profile and Moscow remained formally committed to UN sanctions, few observers would have foreseen that Russia would emerge as Pyongyang's ally and the principal external enabler of this transformation.

As Russia's protracted war against Ukraine entered its fifth year, Moscow's ability to sustain its war effort increasingly depends on Asian partners – the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK). The joint appearance of Xi

Moscow's ability to sustain its war effort increasingly depends on Asian partners

Jinping, Vladimir Putin, and Kim Jong-un at China's military parade celebrating the 80th anniversary of victory in World War II in September 2025 – though without a trilateral summit – symbolised an elevated level of alignment against the western-led order.

Russia's war against Ukraine has recalibrated the strategic calculations of all three actors: Russia has turned to Pyongyang for

ammunition, missiles, and manpower; North Korea has leveraged this opportunity to consolidate its nuclear-armed status while gaining modern combat experience and access to advanced technologies; and China, while remaining the DPRK's primary economic partner, now finds its leverage – especially on denuclearisation of the Korean Peninsula – diminished.

Beijing has increasingly moved to embrace rather than pressure Pyongyang – reflecting its concerns not only over North Korean overtures towards Moscow, but, more importantly, about the growing linkage between security dynamics on the Korean Peninsula and potential Taiwan Strait contingencies within the broader US-led Indo-Pacific security framework. These shifts are unfolding against

The most salient outcome is North Korea's emergence as a more capable, confident, and more consequential actor across both the Indo-Pacific and European theatres

the backdrop of a changing global order following Donald Trump's return to the White House. The most salient outcome so far is North Korea's emergence as a more capable, more confident, and more consequential actor across both the Indo-Pacific and European theatres.

1. REGIME SURVIVAL: FROM PATRONAGE TO SELF-RELIANCE

During the Cold War, the Soviet Union and China played a decisive role in North Korea's survival. Following the Sino-Soviet split, Kim Il-sung, the grandfather of the current North Korean leader, skilfully balanced between the two patrons to consolidate regime autonomy, developing the *Juche* ideology to justify Pyongyang's independent path. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia deprioritised Pyongyang in favour of Seoul, while China's normalisation with South Korea in the 1990s hollowed out the China-DPRK alliance – famously dismissed by a Chinese historian as "a piece of scrap

paper.”¹ To ensure regime survival, Pyongyang pursued “self-reliance in defence,” developing nuclear weapons and delivery systems to deter the United States.

By the late 2010s, the positions of China and Russia toward North Korea converged around what Beijing termed “dual suspension” approach – urging Pyongyang to observe a moratorium on nuclear and missile tests while calling for the suspension of large-scale US–Republic of Korea (ROK) military exercises.² Beijing and Moscow largely welcomed the 2018 Singapore Summit between Kim Jong-un and US President Donald Trump as an effort to de-escalate tensions following North Korea’s announcement that it had completed the “state nuclear force” after the sixth nuclear test and Hwasong-15 intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) launch in 2017.³ Negotiations stalled, however, over Pyongyang’s demand for sanctions relief and Washington’s insistence on concrete denuclearisation steps, including the dismantlement of uranium enrichment facilities.⁴

At the Eighth Party Congress in January 2021, Kim unveiled the “Five-Year Plan for the Development of the Defence Science and Weapon System,” aimed at entrenching North Korea’s nuclear-armed status while explicitly rejecting denuclearisation. In March 2022 – one month after Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine – North Korea broke its self-imposed moratorium and tested its first ICBM since 2017, marking a decisive policy

turn.⁵ North Korea conducted a record-number of missile tests (31 launches) in 2022. In 2023, it tested its first submarine-launched cruise missile and solid-fueled ICBM.⁶ With its six nuclear tests conducted by 2017, Pyongyang is widely assessed to have achieved nuclear warhead miniaturisation suitable for ballistic missile delivery.⁷

2. DEEPENING MOSCOW–PYONGYANG TIES

For North Korea, Russia’s battlefield setbacks created an unprecedented opportunity. Initial rhetorical alignment – including recognition of Russia’s illegal annexation of the Ukrainian territory – evolved into full-fledged military cooperation.

In June 2024, Vladimir Putin made his first visit to Pyongyang since 2000 to sign a Treaty on Comprehensive Strategic Partnership that included mutual military assistance provisions reminiscent of the 1961 Soviet–DPRK treaty. While initially opaque, scepticism about its commitments faded following reports of DPRK troop deployments in October 2024 and the treaty’s ratification by Russia’s legislature.⁸

North Korea – Asia’s third-largest military by active personnel (approximately 1.28 mn troops, according to *The Military Balance*)⁹ – thus entered the European theatre of war, deploying more than 11 000 troops to Russia’s Kursk region. Even after the official conclusion of the Kursk campaign in April 2025, Russian Security Council Secretary Sergei Shoigu stated that 1 000 North Korean military personnel remained engaged in demining operations, while an additional 5 000 were involved in reconstruction efforts.¹⁰ In October, the

¹ Chris Buckley, “[Excerpts From a Chinese Historian’s Speech on North Korea](#),” *The New York Times*, 18 April 2017.

² “[中国外交部和俄罗斯外交部关于朝鲜半岛问题的联合声明](#) [Joint Statement between the Chinese and Russian Foreign Ministries on the Korean Peninsula Issue],” *People’s Daily Overseas Edition*, 5 July 2017.

³ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, “[Wang Yi Talks About the US–DPRK Summit: Though It Brings Hope of Peace, Relevant Parties Still Need to Meet Each Other Halfway](#),” Department of North Americas and Oceanian Affairs, 14 June 2018; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, “[Comment by the Information and Press Department on the US–North Korea Summit in Singapore](#),” 6 December 2018.

⁴ Asaki Asami, “[North Korea’s Foreign Policy and Regime Survival: Strategic Choices between Great Powers](#),” in *Imbalanced Partnerships: China, Russia, and North Korea (China Security Report 2026)*, ed. Masayuki Masuda (National Institute for Defense Studies, Japan, 2025), 64.

Josh Smith and Hyonhee Shin, “[North Korea Says Tested New ICBM, Prepared for Long Confrontation with U.S.](#),” *Reuters*, 26 March 2022.

⁶ International Institute for Strategic Studies, *Military Balance: 2024* (Routledge, 2024), 223.

⁷ Japan Ministry of Defense, “[Recent Missile & Nuclear Development of North Korea](#),” Presentation, October 2025.

⁸ “[Russian Parliament Ratifies Defense Treaty With North Korea](#),” *The Moscow Times*, 24 October 2024.

⁹ International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance 2025* (Routledge, 2025), 206.

¹⁰ Koh Ewe, “[North Korea to Send Thousands to Help Rebuild Russia’s Kursk Region](#),” *BBC*, 18 June 2025.

General Staff of the Ukrainian Armed Forces reported that North Korean troops stationed in Russia were operating drones to identify Ukrainian military positions and assist in targeting rocket strikes against Ukraine's neighbouring Sumy region.¹¹

This alignment with Moscow coincided with a fundamental policy shift toward South Korea. In October 2024, North Korea destroyed inter-Korean roads and railways, constitutionally designated the Republic of Korea a "hostile state," and formally abandoned the goal of reunification.¹²

Moscow-Pyongyang military cooperation is accelerating North Korea's military modernisation, providing invaluable combat experience and technological gains. In spring 2024, Russia vetoed the extension of the mandate of the UN Panel of Experts – while China abstained – which had monitored sanctions implementation since North Korea's second nuclear test in 2009. In September,

Moscow-Pyongyang military cooperation is accelerating North Korea's military modernisation, providing invaluable combat experience and technological gains

Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov stated that the issue of North Korea's denuclearisation was "closed," endorsing Pyongyang's nuclear-arming policy.¹³

The May 2025 report of the Multilateral Sanctions Monitoring Team – established by 11 like-minded countries, including the US, South Korea, Japan, Australia – confirmed extensive sanctions violations, including missile transfers, troop training, air defence system deliveries, petroleum product supplies, and illicit banking ties.¹⁴ According to Ukraine's military intelligence, Russia's use of North

Korean KN-23 ballistic missiles resulted in improved accuracy.¹⁵

Pyongyang is clearly seeking further gains, though the extent to which Russia is willing to share its advanced technologies remains uncertain, fueling speculation. In December 2025, North Korea unveiled the hull of a purported 8 700-ton nuclear-powered strategic submarine, amid unconfirmed reports of a Russian transfer of nuclear reactor technology.¹⁶

3. CHINA'S UNEASE AND DIMINISHING LEVERAGE

For Beijing, the stable Kim dynasty has long served as a strategic buffer, helping to keep US forces and their allies at bay on the Korean Peninsula. At the same time, China's long-standing position has centred on denuclearisation, which it has viewed as essential to preserving strategic balance in Northeast Asia – although this stance has clearly weakened in recent years.

In the early years of Kim Jong-un's rule, Beijing–Pyongyang relations deteriorated amid repeated nuclear tests. Major sources of bilateral tension included Kim's execution of

his uncle Jang Song-thaek – a senior official with strong ties to China – in 2013; Xi Jinping's decision to visit Seoul before Pyongyang after taking office; and China's support for UN Security Council sanctions following North Korea's fourth and fifth nuclear tests. Pyongyang reacted sharply to China-backed sanctions, openly accusing Beijing of aligning with the United States.¹⁷

Sanctions imposed in 2016–17 severely damaged North Korea's economy, as China banned key imports and exports and halted the employment of North Korean workers, cutting

¹¹ "Kyiv Says North Korean Troops Operate Reconnaissance Drones over Ukraine," *Reuters*, 16 October 2025.

¹² Rachel Minyoung Lee, "North Korea's Post-Parliament Tension Signaling," *38 North*, 18 October 2024.

¹³ "N. Korea's 'denuclearization' Issue Closed - Lavrov," *Interfax.Ru*, 26 September 2024.

¹⁴ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, "Release of the First Report of the Multilateral Sanctions Monitoring Team (MSMT)," Press Release, 29 May 2025.

¹⁵ Kateryna Hodunova, "Russia Significantly Improved North Korea's Shoddy KN-23 Ballistic Missiles, Ukraine's Budanov Says," *The Kyiv Independent*, 10 June 2025.

¹⁶ Lee Chul-Jae, "Russia May Have Supplied North with Nuclear Reactor, South's Military Says," *Korea JoongAng Daily*, 17 September 2025; "Spanish Paper Says Russian Ship That Sank in the Mediterranean Was Carrying Nuclear Reactors for North Korea," *The Insider*, 30 December 2025.

¹⁷ Asami, "North Korea's Foreign Policy," 70.

off Pyongyang's primary sources of foreign currency. Although limited trade continued, North Korean exports to China collapsed by over 88% between 2017 and 2018.¹⁸

Against the backdrop of US–DPRK summits in 2018–19, Beijing moved quickly to repair ties with Pyongyang

Against the backdrop of US–DPRK summits in 2018–19, Beijing moved quickly to repair ties with Pyongyang. However, Kim's distrust of Beijing has periodically surfaced. Former US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo revealed in his memoir that Kim Jong-un described China as "a liar" during the 2018 talks.¹⁹ South Korean media reported in 2024 that Kim privately referred to China as a "mortal enemy."²⁰ Diplomatic patterns underscore this strain: high-level exchanges between Moscow and Pyongyang surged from eight visits in 2023 to 46 in 2024, while Beijing–Pyongyang exchanges remained limited, with four visits in 2023 and six in 2024.²¹ The 75th anniversary of China–DPRK diplomatic ties in 2024 passed without major celebrations, in contrast to the highly symbolic 70th anniversary in 2019.²²

North Korea's accelerating consolidation of its nuclear-armed status – now reinforced by closer political and military ties with Russia – has further narrowed Beijing's room for manoeuvre. The May 2024 China–Japan–South Korea trilateral declaration merely stated that the parties "reiterated positions" on denuclearisation, suggesting a dilution

of China's stance.²³ Xi Jinping's published statement following the September 2025 China–DPRK summit omitted any reference to denuclearisation altogether.²⁴ Finally, in December, China's defence white paper dropped the phrase "denuclearisation of the Korean Peninsula" for the first time in 19 years, signalling Beijing's tacit acceptance of North Korea's nuclear armed status.²⁵

4. PYONGYANG'S ECONOMIC DEPENDENCY ON BEIJING

While the joint appearance of Chinese, Russian and North Korean leaders at China's military parade symbolised alignment against the western-led order, the absence of a trilateral summit underscores the persistence of bilateral – not trilateral – dynamics.

North Korean state media coverage of Kim's meeting with Putin was emphatically positive, whereas reporting on the Kim–Xi summit – though generally favourable – was noticeably restrained. Some analysts interpret this disparity as an indication that Pyongyang's relations with Beijing have not yet been fully repaired.²⁶

Nevertheless, China–DPRK trade rebounded following the Kim–Xi summit, reaching its highest level in six years.²⁷ Construction of the

¹⁸ Asami, "North Korea's Foreign Policy," 67.

¹⁹ Kim So-hyun, "[Kim Jong-Un Said He Needed USFK to Protect Him from China: Pompeo](#)," *The Korea Herald*, 25 January 2023.

²⁰ Jeong Yeong-gyo, "[단독: 김정은 '중은 숙적'...한국도 간중견군행사에 北 없었다](#) [Exclusive: Kim Jong-un: 'China is our mortal enemy'... North Korea was not present at the Chinese military foundation ceremony that South Korea also attended]," *The JoongAng*, 20 September 2024.

²¹ Public Security Intelligence Agency (Japan), [内外情勢の回顧と展望](#) [Review and outlook on domestic and international affairs] (Public Security Intelligence Agency, 2025), 24.

²² Seung-Yeon Chung, "[North Korea Forgoes Celebrations for 75th Anniversary of Ties with China](#)," *NK News*, 7 October 2024.

²³ The 2019 trilateral summit statement declared the three countries' commitments to "the complete denuclearisation of the Korean Peninsula." Masayuki Masuda, "China's Global Diplomatic Posture under Great-Power Competition: An Asymmetrical Sino-Russian 'Strategic Cooperation,'" in *Imbalanced Partnerships: China, Russia, and North Korea*, ed. Masayuki Masuda, [China Security Report 2026](#) (National Institute for Defense Studies, Japan, 2025), 34–35.

²⁴ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "[General Secretary and President Xi Jinping Holds Talks with General Secretary of the Workers' Party of Korea and President of the State Affairs of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea Kim Jong Un](#)," 5 September 2025.

²⁵ Kim Chul-Woong, "[China Omits 'denuclearization' from Newly-Released Defense White Paper](#)," *Korea JoongAng Daily*, 7 December 2025.

²⁶ Rachel Minyoung Lee, "[Kim Jong Un's Beijing Visit: A View From North Korea](#)," *38 North*, 8 September 2025.

²⁷ Anton Sokolin, "[North Korea-China Trade Surges to Six-Year High on Heels of Kim-Xi Summit](#)," *NK News*, 20 October 2025.

long-delayed New Yalu River Bridge, a major China–North Korea border project stalled for years due to Pyongyang’s funding constraints, entered its final phase in 2025.²⁸ China has also reportedly resumed construction of another cross-border road bridge linking its remote city of Tumen to northeastern North Korea.²⁹ These projects are expected to significantly expand bilateral trade, contributing to the DPRK economy, while increasing already high Pyongyang’s economic dependency on Beijing (in 2023, China accounted for 98.3% of DPRK trade).³⁰

Pyongyang appears to diversify its trade via Russia

Pyongyang, therefore, appears to attempt to diversify its trade via Russia. Construction of the first-ever Russia–DPRK road bridge across the Tumen River began in spring 2025 and is expected to be completed by mid-2026, strengthening direct trade and logistics beyond the existing Soviet-era rail “Friendship Bridge.”³¹

5. THE EMERGING WORLD ORDER

Despite balancing between Beijing and Moscow, Pyongyang’s primary concern remains Washington. US strikes on Iran’s nuclear facilities in June 2025 have likely reconvinced Kim Jong-un of the need to accelerate its nuclear weapons programmes for regime security.³²

Pyongyang has, nonetheless, signalled openness to renewed talks with Donald Trump – on the condition that Washington abandons its denuclearisation agenda. After his second

inauguration, Trump expressed his desire to rebuild relations with Kim Jong-un, describing North Korea as a “nuclear power.”³³ Kim also expressed willingness to meet Trump again, stating at the Supreme People’s Assembly in September 2025: “Personally, I still have a good memory of the current US President Trump.”³⁴ North Korean leader’s visit to Beijing in the same month may thus be interpreted as an effort to strengthen his bargaining position ahead of potential future engagement with Washington, echoing his meeting with Xi Jinping in 2018 – his first in seven years – shortly before the US–DPRK Singapore summit.³⁵

At the same time, US policy signals toward the Korean Peninsula have appeared increasingly ambiguous. A joint fact sheet released by the White House in mid-November, two weeks after Trump’s visit to South Korea, reaffirmed the US–ROK

US policy signals toward the Korean Peninsula have appeared increasingly ambiguous

commitment to the complete denuclearisation of the DPRK.³⁶ However, the 2025 US National Security Strategy published in early December omitted explicit references to both North Korea and the denuclearisation of the Korean Peninsula, while urging South Korea and Japan to increase burden-sharing to “deter adversaries and protect the First Island Chain,” with a clear strategic focus on China.³⁷

²⁸ Joseph S. Bermudez Jr., Victor Cha, and Jennifer Jun, “[Progress at the Much-Delayed New Yalu River Bridge](#),” *Beyond Parallel*, 11 December 2025.

²⁹ Colin Zwirko and Dave Yin, “[Remote Chinese City Revives North Korea Border Bridge Project to Boost Trade](#),” *NK PRO*, 1 August 2025.

³⁰ Anton Sokolin, “[North Korea’s Economic Dependence on China Reached New Heights in 2023: Report | NK News](#),” *NK News*, 22 July 2024.

³¹ James Chater, “[North Korea Hails First Road Bridge to Russia](#),” *BBC*, 30 April 2025.

³² Julian Ryall, “[After US Bombs Iran, North Korea Watches Closely](#),” *Dw.Com*, 24 June 2025.

³³ Anna J. Park, “[Trump Attempts to Cajole NK into Dialogue by Calling It ‘Nuclear Power’: Expert](#),” *The Korea Times*, 14 March 2025.

³⁴ Rachel Minyoung Lee, “[North Korea-China Relations Not Yet Fully Restored; North Korea Hints Kim-Trump Talks Possible, Reaffirms Two Koreas Policy](#),” *38 North*, 15 October 2025.

³⁵ “[Kim Jong Un and Donald Trump Express Willingness to Hold Summit on June 12](#),” *Kyodo News*, 27 May 2018.

³⁶ Washington also approved expanded South Korean civilian nuclear activities – including uranium enrichment, spent fuel reprocessing, and the development of nuclear-powered attack submarines. The White House, “[Joint Fact Sheet on President Donald J. Trump’s Meeting with President Lee Jae Myung](#),” 14 November 2025.

³⁷ The President of the United States of America, “[National Security Strategy of the United States of America](#)” (The White House, November 2025).

These dynamics are further complicated by the apparent erosion of the “collective west.”³⁸ US foreign policy under the banner of “flexible realism” has increasingly departed from liberal norms and the rules-based international order. The Trump administration’s growing focus on the Western Hemisphere may signal to Beijing and Moscow a diminished US interest in other regions, reinforcing perceptions of an emerging “multipolar world order” defined by spheres of influence among great powers.

China, Russia, and North Korea, though aligned in resisting what they perceive as a US-dominant order, do not share a unified strategy toward Washington

That said, China, Russia, and North Korea, though aligned in resisting what they perceive as a US-dominant order, do not share a unified strategy toward Washington. Each seeks to engage President Trump in pursuit of distinct national objectives: Xi Jinping aims to strengthen China’s position in trade disputes and on the Taiwan issue; Vladimir Putin to leverage Washington to pressure Ukraine into capitulation; and Kim Jong-un to secure recognition of North Korea as a nuclear-weapon state.

Pyongyang appears to be probing opportunities within Trump’s transactional approach, including its stated preference for building pragmatic, commercial relations without imposing regime change – a threat the Kim dynasty has long regarded as existential. While the North Korean Foreign Ministry spokesperson criticised the US attack on Venezuela, the statement was not published in *Rodong Sinmun*, the Workers’ Party’s official newspaper. Anti-US rhetoric remains salient, but personal criticism of Trump has been conspicuously restrained since Kim’s remarks about his “good memory” of the US president.³⁹

³⁸ Kristi Raik, “2026: Europe’s Year of Bad Choices,” *International Centre for Defence and Security*, 9 January 2026.

³⁹ Atsuhito Isozaki, “ベネズエラ情勢に反応しつつも「トランプ批判」は行わず (2026年1月4日~2026年1月10日) [Reacting to the situation in Venezuela but not criticizing Trump (January 4, 2026 - January 10, 2026)],” *Foresight*, 13 January 2026.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Pyongyang has continued to signal enduring alignment with Moscow. In October 2025, speaking at a groundbreaking ceremony for a memorial honouring North Korean soldiers killed while fighting alongside Russian forces in the Kursk region, Kim Jong-un declared that the military brotherhood between North Korea and Russia would “advance non-stop.”⁴⁰ In December, Kim paid an unusually personal condolence visit to the Russian Embassy in Pyongyang following the sudden death of Russian ambassador Alexander Matsegora – an unprecedented gesture highlighting the depth of bilateral ties.

What, then, would constrain further expansion of Russia–DPRK military cooperation, with implications for both European and East Asian security? Given the Trump administration’s accommodating posture toward Moscow and the continued US–North Korea stalemate,

Given the Trump administration’s accommodating posture toward Moscow and the continued US–North Korea stalemate, leverage appears to rest with China

remaining leverage over Pyongyang appears to rest primarily with China – specifically, the extent to which Beijing is willing to tolerate a shift in the military balance on the Korean Peninsula.⁴¹ This calculation is, however, increasingly shaped by Beijing’s perception that Peninsula security is becoming intertwined with the broader US-led Indo-Pacific security framework.

Chinese officials have consistently refrained from publicly assessing Russia–DPRK military

⁴⁰ “North Korea’s Kim Says Military Ties with Russia Will ‘Advance Non-Stop,’” *Reuters*, 23 October 2025.

⁴¹ The Biden administration also failed to send a clear signal to Moscow regarding the deployment of North Korean troops. House Intelligence Committee Chair Mike Turner’s warning that the US should consider taking “direct military action” if North Korean forces enter the war in Ukraine went unheeded. Ellen Mitchell, “Mike Turner: US Should Consider ‘military Action’ if North Korean Troops Enter Ukraine,” *The Hill*, 23 October 2024.

cooperation, referring to it as a bilateral matter, even after both Pyongyang and Moscow confirmed the deployment of North Korean troops to Russia's Kursk region.⁴² This ambiguity supposedly reflects Beijing's dilemma.

China may tolerate closer Russia–North Korea ties insofar as they divert US attention and resources from the Indo-Pacific to the European theatre

On the one hand, China may tolerate closer Russia–North Korea ties insofar as they divert US attention and resources from the Indo-Pacific to the European theatre. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi reportedly told EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Kaja Kallas that Beijing did not want to see Russia defeated in Ukraine, fearing that such an outcome would expedite the US strategic pivot toward China.⁴³ From this perspective, Beijing may be willing to overlook North Korea's support for Russia's war efforts.

On the other hand, Beijing likely views Russia–North Korea military cooperation as risking an acceleration of US–Japan–South Korea security cooperation and further consolidation of the US-led alliance system in the Indo-Pacific.⁴⁴ Indeed, China appears to be distancing itself from Moscow–Pyongyang military ties. According to South Korean intelligence, in 2023, then Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu reportedly proposed trilateral naval exercises with North Korea and China during a meeting with Kim Jong-un; however, no such exercises have been confirmed to date.⁴⁵

Informed by this latter assessment, the Biden administration and US allies sought to convey to Beijing that deepening Russia–North Korea military engagement runs counter to China's stated goal of regional stability, particularly on the Korean Peninsula, in the hope that Beijing would exert influence over Pyongyang.⁴⁶ Similarly, South Korea's Lee Jae Myung administration has recently sought China's mediation and economic leverage to help resume dialogue with North Korea.⁴⁷

These efforts, however, have so far produced few tangible results. Given China's shifting narratives on denuclearisation, Beijing is unlikely to pressure Pyongyang in ways that US allies might expect. Instead, by resuming cross-border economic projects, China appears to be opting to embrace Pyongyang politically rather than pressure it.

This approach may help Beijing restrain North Korea's drift toward Moscow. More importantly, however, it likely reflects Beijing's concern over the growing linkage between Korean Peninsula security and potential Taiwan Strait contingencies within the broader Indo-Pacific security landscape.⁴⁸ The Trump administration's pursuit of greater strategic flexibility for the 28 500-strong US Forces Korea (USFK) – including potential redeployment beyond the Peninsula as part of a greater Indo-Pacific posture – has been widely regarded as aimed at countering China, although Seoul has approached such proposals cautiously, given its complex political and economic relationship with Beijing.⁴⁹ The US Defense Strategy published in January reinforced this shift by calling for greater responsibility on the

⁴² Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "[Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Lin Jian's Regular Press Conference on November 1, 2024](#)," Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1 November 2024; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "[Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Guo Jiakun's Regular Press Conference on April 28, 2025](#)," 28 April 2025.

⁴³ Finbarr Bermingham, "[Exclusive: China Tells EU It Does Not Want to See Russia Lose Its War in Ukraine: Sources](#)," *South China Morning Post*, 4 July 2025.

⁴⁴ Masayuki Masuda, "A Dangerous Dynamic Involving China, Russia, and North Korea," in *Imbalanced Partnerships: China, Russia, and North Korea* (China Security Report 2026), ed. Masayuki Masuda (National Institute for Defense Studies, Japan, 2025), 84.

⁴⁵ Tong-Hyung Kim, "[Seoul's Spy Agency Says Russia Has Likely Proposed North Korea to Join Three-Way Drills with China](#)," *AP News*, 4 September 2023.

⁴⁶ Edward Wong, "[U.S. Turns to China to Stop North Korean Troops From Fighting for Russia](#)," *The New York Times*, 31 October 2024; "[Japan Expresses Concern to China over Russia-North Korea Ties](#)," *France 24*, 5 November 2024.

⁴⁷ Le Nhu Mai, "[Lee's First Visit to Beijing: A Nuanced Restoration of China-South Korea Ties](#)," *The Diplomat*, 8 January 2026.

⁴⁸ For such a discussion, see: Alex Soohoon Lee and Choongkoo Lee, "[The Taiwan Strait and the ROK-U.S. Alliance](#)," *The Korean Journal of Defense Analysis* 35, no. 1 (2023): 153–64.

⁴⁹ See, for example: USFK Commander Gen. Xavier Brunson's speech in May 2025. Song Sang-ho, "[Gen. Brunson Stresses Strategic Value of USFK Presence in Overcoming 'Tyranny of Distance'](#)," *Yonhap News Agency*, 16 May 2025; Kim Eun-jung, "[\(LEAD\) Lee Says Difficult to Agree on Demand on Strategic Flexibility of USFK](#)," *Yonhap News Agency*, 25 August 2025.

part of South Korea, with “critical but more limited US support” on the Korean Peninsula, while prioritising US efforts to deter China.⁵⁰

Russia’s war against Ukraine has thus produced not only a European security crisis, but also a recalibration of strategic balances in Northeast Asia

The Workers’ Party Congress in February 2026 hailed Kim’s achievements in building an elite and powerful army capable of confronting

external threats and “fully prepared for any form of war,” with a “radically improved” nuclear deterrent under the 2021 five-year military modernisation plan.⁵¹ Russia’s war against Ukraine has thus produced not only a European security crisis, but also a recalibration of strategic balances in Northeast Asia – one in which North Korea has emerged as a more capable, more confident, and more consequential actor, with profound implications for both European and East Asian security.

⁵⁰ The US Department of War, [2026 National Defense Strategy](#) (Department of War, 23 January 2026).

⁵¹ [“Respected Comrade Kim Jong Un Elected as General Secretary of WPK,” KCNA Watch](#), 23 February 2026.

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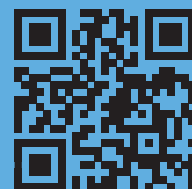
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