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# ROK-US POLICY BRIEF

2024-Oct. ISSUE 2

CONTEMPLATING  
PYONGYANG-MOSCOW RELATIONS:  
HOW NORTH KOREA GOT HERE,  
AND WHAT WE MIGHT EXPECT

BY RACHEL MINYOUNG LEE



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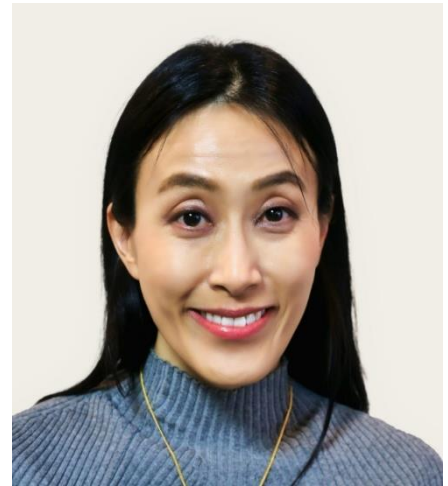
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Lee was a North Korean propaganda analyst with Open Source Enterprise in the US government from 2000 to 2019. During that time, she wrote on a broad range of North Korean issues, from leadership, domestic politics and economy, and foreign policy, to social and cultural developments. As Analysis Team Lead, Lee headed a team of collection officers and analysts to collect on, research, and analyze North and South Korean issues with implications for Pyongyang's regime stability and regional security.



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# CONTEMPLATING PYONGYANG-MOSCOW RELATIONS: HOW NORTH KOREA GOT HERE, AND WHAT WE MIGHT EXPECT

RACHEL MINYOUNG LEE

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October 2024

As the world was busy trying to make sense of Kim Jong Un's first publicized [visit](#) to a uranium enrichment facility, Kim commemorated the [first-year anniversary](#) of his Vostochny Spaceport [summit](#) with Putin by giving an unusually warm welcome to the [visiting](#) Russian emissary, Sergei Shoigu. A few days later, Foreign Minister Choe Son Hui [spoke](#) at the First BRICS Women's Forum in Russia. It reflected the North's [growing interest](#) in multilateral institutions where, to borrow Choe's words, the country might play a role in "fulfill[ing] its responsible mission for building an equal multi-polar world."

Much of the policy discourse on North Korea's foreign policy in Seoul and Washington remains centered on the United States. As such, practically every notable statement or action by Pyongyang inevitably leads to the conclusion that it must have targeted Washington. (Many news reports and commentaries on Kim's recent uranium facility visit, for example, [tied](#) it to the upcoming US presidential election.) And for good reason, too: For decades, Pyongyang's foreign policy focused on winning regime security and improving the economy by striking a nuclear deal with the United States.

The collapse of the second US-North Korea summit in Hanoi in early 2019 and the shifting global order over the past few years, however, have changed Pyongyang's domestic and foreign policy goals. And Russia, while it may not have been the primary driver in the beginning, now plays a significant part in Kim's calculus. While we do not want to unnecessarily exaggerate the importance of Russia, the ongoing honeymoon between Pyongyang and Moscow also tells us that we should not play down the meaning of their relationship.

In order to map out the potential implications of North Korea's deepening ties with Russia, we should first understand the context of North Korea's policy change and what intentions Pyongyang seems to harbor toward Moscow. Kim

appears to see opportunities for improving the situation at home while becoming a bigger player internationally by forging stronger ties with Russia. The international community, therefore, should be prepared for this relationship lasting beyond the war in Ukraine.

### Policy Shift: The Context

North Korea's embrace of Russia did not occur overnight, and the war in Ukraine was not the root

cause, though it spurred Pyongyang's realignment with its great-power neighbor. The changes in North Korea-Russia relations should be understood as part of North Korea's broader foreign policy reorientation following the collapse of the Hanoi summit.

Shortly after the Hanoi summit, Kim [revived](#) "self-reliance" as a key policy and started to [resume](#) weapons tests. At the time, it was not clear whether the North had simply closed the door to diplomacy with the United States. However, Kim's [comment](#) at the end of 2019 that the two countries were in for a "long confrontation"—an argument he has since [repeated](#)—and North Korea's nuclear-focused five-year defense development [plan](#) presented in January 2021, suggested that a broader, deeper reevaluation of policy toward the United States might be in the works.

Pyongyang's [changing perception](#) of US global leadership appears to have played a key part in reshaping its US policy. The chaotic US pullout from Afghanistan in the summer of 2021 seems to have been decisive. It was around this time that the North Korean Foreign Ministry started to support China and Russia on key international or foreign policy issues, such as [multipolarization](#) and US-China [competition](#). This step would later prove to have been a harbinger of Pyongyang's [foreign policy reorientation](#): renouncing the more-than-three-decade line of normalization of relations with the United States through denuclearization, and nonalignment with China and Russia. It was probably not a coincidence that the following month, Kim publicly [acknowledged](#) a "neo-Cold War" for the first time.

If Pyongyang needed that one last confirmation that its foreign policy reorientation was on the right track, it was Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and what Kim almost certainly viewed as an upending of the

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existing global order. In the fall of that same year, Kim [declared](#) that there would be no more bargaining over his nuclear programs, essentially announcing the end of his country's three-decade-old policy toward the United States.

North Korea's pivot toward Russia was quick and decisive. This started with the Foreign Ministry's [support](#) for Russia's war against Ukraine and its [recognition](#) of the two Ukrainian breakaway regions. A key inflection point came in July 2023, when North Korea [invited](#) the Russian

defense minister as well as a Chinese delegation to a military parade marking the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Armistice Day, an event that the North historically had commemorated with the Chinese. North Korea's relations with China, by contrast, have become noticeably [strained](#) over the past year, just as North Korea started to align itself more closely with the Russians.

## Intent Versus “Strategic” or “Transactional”

One of the first questions that arises in connection with the North Korea-Russia relationship is whether it will be [“strategic” or “transactional.”](#) The honest answer is that nobody knows, probably including Kim and Putin. What really matters is current leadership intent, because that is what will drive the decisions and actions of both countries. And intent—unlike predicting an outcome—can be deciphered with relative accuracy through close analysis.

**By strengthening ties with Moscow, Pyongyang has already reaped benefits diplomatically, economically, and possibly even on the military technology front.**

For North Korea at least, the intent appears to be building a longer-term, strategic relationship with Russia. This is based on the North's Russia policy change occurring as part of its foreign policy reorientation; the highly unusual level, scope, and frequency of exchange between the two countries, including the two Kim-Putin summits in less than one year; and finally, the new upgraded bilateral [treaty](#). Moreover, Kim [referred](#) to North Korea-Russia relations as an “alliance” on the day of signing the treaty (even though Putin never used that word in public). One notable but often overlooked fact also is that, in an apparent effort to strengthen the foundation of the ties, North Korea gave an [ideological underpinning](#) to its relationship with Russia, similar to its relationship with China. It [said](#) “anti-imperialist independence” was the “ideological basis” of Pyongyang-Moscow relations. For years, North Korea has characterized “anti-imperialist independence” or socialism as the root of its relations with China.

How North Korea perceives opportunities in great-power competition and its improved ties with Russia is another question we need to address due to its impact on Pyongyang's domestic and foreign policy decisions. By strengthening ties with Moscow, Pyongyang has already reaped benefits [diplomatically](#), [economically](#), and possibly even on the [military technology](#) front. The treaty, which pledges [bilateral cooperation](#) across the full range of areas, can offer Kim even more opportunities. Putin, for one, already [remarked](#) during his recent visit to Pyongyang that international sanctions against North Korea should be “revised”—a declaration to the world that the two countries would not be stymied by them as they step up cooperation.

## Potential Implications

Domestically, one key potential implication of the deepening Pyongyang-Moscow relationship is the breathing space it provides to Kim's economic policy. Russian supplies of [food](#) and [oil](#) in return for North Korea's [weapons exports](#) almost certainly have [benefitted](#) the North Korean economy. More important for the longer-term future of the

country, however, is Kim’s thinking on economic policy, including the [market-oriented initiatives](#) that he launched early in his reign but has [slow-walked](#) in recent years. Notably, Kim has increased central control over the economy, which goes against the essence of his own market-oriented measures: decentralization of management responsibilities, or giving more latitude to lower-level units and individual workers to incentivize them. The prospects for North Korea-Russia economic cooperation are not bright, as [past attempts](#) have shown. Yet, Kim likely sees opportunities in the treaty’s provisions on economic cooperation and “a trade and mutual settlement system” Putin [said](#) he would develop with North Korea. These perceived opportunities almost certainly will give even less motivation for North Korea to relinquish its policy of greater centralization and pick up on its market-oriented measures.

**We should also assume that North Korea may be learning a lesson from how Russia has managed to grow the economy by fueling its defense industry while fighting Ukraine.**

We assume that Kim and his top associates are [testing](#) their weapons on the Ukrainian battlefields. We should also assume that North Korea may be learning a lesson from how Russia has managed to [grow](#) the economy by fueling its defense industry while fighting Ukraine. In recent years, North Korean media have stressed the importance of [prioritizing](#) defense development over the

civilian economy. Similarly, there has been a significant uptick since August 2023 in Kim’s visits to [munitions factories](#) and “[defense industrial enterprises.](#)” These may simply reflect Kim’s desire to both flaunt and maximize the country’s weapons production capacity, taking advantage of the war in Ukraine. However, we should also be open to the possibility that this may signal a more significant shift in North Korea’s economic policy. North Korea, for example, could be attempting to build an economy [led](#) by a revitalized defense industry, similar to Russia.

Externally, North Korea’s reduced appetite for engagement with Washington, China’s waning influence over Pyongyang, and the North’s increased military adventurism are the most commonly cited implications of deepening Pyongyang-Moscow relations.

One overlooked but interesting possibility is North Korea’s participation in multilateral institutions in which Russia has a leading role, which could have diplomatic and economic payoffs for Pyongyang. For one, Pyongyang may attempt to gain legitimacy for its own diplomatic agenda and even become a bigger actor on the global stage by participating in an anti-US and anti-West movement with like-minded countries. Secondly, Pyongyang may see an opportunity to further dent the impact of international sanctions by joining institutions leading the de-dollarization movement, for example the BRICS. Article 7 of the new treaty stipulates mutual support for accession to regional or international organizations, which means Russia can help North Korea join multilateral institutions. It is in this context that Choe Son Hui’s recent participation in a BRICS event was [significant](#).

**Pyongyang may see an opportunity to further dent the impact of international sanctions by joining institutions leading the de-dollarization movement.**

Alternatively, North Korea may see an opportunity to build a new bloc of influence with Russia outside existing multilateral institutions. Pyongyang over the past year has said it would [build](#) a new security structure or [establish](#) a new multipolar world order with Russia, an idea [echoed](#) by Putin on the eve of his visit to Pyongyang. In that vein, it would be worth noting that North Korea, coinciding with Shoigu's latest visit, [mentioned](#) for the first time the creation of "a just strategic axis," apparently a reference to a group of countries targeted by the United States, including North Korea.

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## Conclusion

The immediate to short-term benefits of this relationship are clear. The mid- to longer-term prospects are less certain. Many experts have pointed out that North Korea-Russia relations [will not endure](#) beyond the war in Ukraine because Russia will no longer need North Korea's help then.

And of course, it is a given that state-to-state relations, and by a natural extension treaties, are bound to change as geopolitics evolve. When Kim Il Sung signed a treaty with Khrushchev in July 1961, little did he know that he would lose faith in the Soviets 15 months later, in the wake of the Cuban missile crisis. North Korea now seems to view Russia as the leader of a "just strategic axis." Would North Korea remain aligned with Moscow if it no longer views the latter as useful or powerful, or if it identifies an opportunity to strike a nuclear deal with Washington?

Yet, the past two-and-a-half years tell us to be imaginative. Nobody could have imagined prior to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, or even when the two countries were well into the war, that North Korea-Russia relations would be where they are today. Moreover, one could argue that there is now greater motivation on both sides to make good on the promises they made. The geopolitics have changed, North Korea is not what it was in the old days, and Russia likely will not just return to its old place after the war.

**The geopolitics have changed, North Korea is not what it was in the old days, and Russia likely will not just return to its old place after the war.**

Speaking of imagination, we should take note that Shoigu's short visit to Pyongyang on September 13 took place just after Putin renewed his [threat](#) of a war against NATO. Did Putin really dispatch Shoigu to Pyongyang to commemorate the first-year anniversary of the Kim-Putin summit in the Russian Far East, or did he need to urgently send an important message to Kim through a trusted emissary? Only time will tell if North Korea will go beyond supplying weapons should Russia escalate the war.

*The ROK-US Policy Brief is a joint publication between the Seoul National University Institute for Peace and Unification Studies (IPUS) and The George Washington University Institute for Korean Studies (GWIKS) dedicated to exploring current Korea-related policy matters within regional and global contexts.*

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