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ROK-US POLICY BRIEF

2025- September. ISSUE 13

A GEOSTRATEGIC SHIFT:
TRILATERAL CONVERGENCE
OF CHINA, RUSSIA, AND NORTH KOREA
ON THE KOREAN PENINSULA

BY TROY STANGARONE



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2025-September. ISSUE 13

지정학적 전환: 한반도를 둘러싼 중국·러시아·북한의 삼자 공조

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September 2025

When Kim Jong-un stood alongside Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin at China's commemoration of the 80th anniversary of end of the Second World War, it was the culmination of a series of geopolitical shifts that has reconfigured North Korea's position in the region dramatically within less than a decade. While these shifts have not cemented into a formal alliance among Russia, China, and North Korea, they do have significant implications for the Korean Peninsula.

The road to Kim's attendance in Beijing begins with the failure of US-North Korea nuclear negotiations in Hanoi. With the failure of the Hanoi Summit, Russia and China began to lose interest in enforcing UN sanctions and introduced a draft resolution at the UN to relieve sanctions on North Korea. The 2019 resolution would have rolled back UN sanctions on overseas labor, textiles, and seafood, all of which were significant sources of foreign exchange for the regime. A similar resolution was introduced by China and Russia again in 2021.

**하노이 회담 이후 러시아와 중국은
북한과 점차 보조를 맞추기
시작했으며, 지전략 전환의 3 가지
요인은 북한의 지전략 옵션을
근본적으로 재구성하게 하였다**

While Russia and China began moving into alignment with North Korea after Hanoi, three significant geostrategic shifts reshaped North Korea's geostrategic options. First, as the relationship between the United States and China has evolved into a strategic [competition for influence](#) in the Indo-Pacific, Beijing's incentive to cooperate with Washington on North Korea has declined. Second, the relationship between China

and Russia grew closer with a [“no limits”](#) partnership, while finally the [sanctioning of Russia](#) in response to its invasion of Ukraine incentivized the development of a military relationship between Moscow and Pyongyang.

North Korea’s Beneficial Relations with Russia

The most significant change has been in Russia’s relationship with North Korea. With both nations under extensive economic sanctions – Russia for its invasion of Ukraine and North Korea for the development of its nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programs – there was a strong incentive for Moscow and Pyongyang to deepen relations, both militarily and economically.

**모스크바와 평양은 군사적·경제적
관계를 심화할 강력한 동기를
공유하고 있었다**

Since September of 2023, Pyongyang has provided Russia an estimated [12 million artillery shells](#), over [100 ballistic missiles](#), hundreds of [howitzers and multiple rocket-launchers](#), and [upwards of 15,000 troops](#).

Russia and North Korea have also expanded their economic relationship. Trade reached a new high of [\\$34 million](#) in 2024, and Russia is building a [new road bridge](#) to connect the two countries to further expand economic relations. North Korea also provides more than [10,000 overseas laborers](#) to Russia for construction projects, as well as work in textile factories and IT centers. One report also suggests that North Korea may send [25,000 workers](#) to Russia to aid in the productions of drones for the war.

In return, Russia has taken a series of steps to support North Korea, including agreeing to a new [Treaty on Comprehensive Strategic Partnership](#) that commits each country to come to the other’s aid if they are attacked. Russia [vetoed the extension](#) of the Panel of Experts mandate to monitor violations of UN sanctions on North Korea. It is also believed to have provided North Korea with assistance in avoiding [financial sanctions](#), [technical assistance](#) on its satellite launch, [air defense systems](#), advanced electronic warfare equipment, assistance in improving its ballistic missiles, more than a [million barrels](#) of petroleum, and there are increasing suspicions that it may be assisting North Korea with the development of [nuclear powered submarines](#).

At the recent commemoration in Beijing, Kim and Putin held a bilateral meeting. [Kim pledged](#) that “if there’s anything I can do for you and the people of Russia, if there is more that needs to be done, I will consider it as a fraternal duty, an obligation that we surely need to bear, and will be prepared to do everything possible to help,” while Putin [referred to the relationship](#) as "special ones of trust, friendship and alliance" and invited Kim to visit Russia.

North Korea’s Relations with China

While there has been [speculation](#) that China is [concerned about the deepening ties](#) between North Korea and Russia, it more likely has provided [tacit support](#). Chinese officials have [privately conceded](#) to their European counterparts that it is not in Beijing’s interest for Russia to lose its war with Ukraine. In this context, North

Korea is able to provide the direct military support China cannot, furthering Chinese interests in supporting Russia's eventual victory in Ukraine.

Other factors suggest that China is comfortable with Russia's relationship with North Korea. [Chinese exports to North Korea](#) through August this year are \$1.36 billion, their highest since the pandemic. [North Korean exports to China](#) are also at a post-pandemic and post-UN sanction period high of \$279 million through August. Though still significantly below the \$1.3 billion North Korea exported to China through the same period in 2017 before the implementation of UN sectoral sanctions. Chinese exports of [refined petroleum](#) to North

**중국이 북·러 밀착에 불만을 표시하려
했다 하더라도, 중국이 북한과의
경제관계에서 그런 불편함을 드러내지는
않는 것으로 보인다**

Korea also grew in 2024. If Beijing was trying to express any displeasure with North Korea's relationship with Russia, it does not appear to be doing so through its economic relationship with Pyongyang.

Kim also held a [bilateral meeting](#) with Xi while in Beijing.

The two sides agreed to increase high-level visits, improve strategic cooperation, and protect shared interest. Reinforcing the idea of enduring relations with North Korea, Xi noted, "This position will not change regardless of how the international situation evolves."

What Deeper China-Russia-North Korea Trilateral Ties Mean for the Korean Peninsula

A fundamental shift in how Russia and China approach the Korean Peninsula has taken place. For much of the last two decades Moscow and Beijing were supportive of efforts to denuclearize North Korea, even if they were not always as cooperative as the [United States and its allies might have hoped](#). That period has ended.

The Victory Day celebration and the solidarity shown between China, Russia, and North Korea was a symbolic demonstration of the geostrategic shift that has been building in recent years. Beijing [utilized the parade](#) to highlight its growing military and diplomatic influence, but also its vision for a new international order that is not dominated by the West.

The commemoration also highlighted North Korea's new place in this shifting order. No North Korean leader had taken part in a Chinese commemoration of the end of the Second World War since [Kim Il-sung in 1959](#), and he was not given the prominent position granted to his grandson. China's decision to have Kim stand next to Xi should be understood within the broader context of China's views on the changing geopolitical order.

**김정은을 시진핑 곁에 세운 중국의
결정은 변화하는 지정학 질서에 대한
중국의 인식 대전환이라는 맥락
하에서 이해되어야 한다**

Beijing's own desire to [avoid formal entanglements](#) likely precludes the formalization of a trilateral alliance with Moscow and Pyongyang, but the experience of US-Korea-Japan relations demonstrates that cooperation can proceed without a formal structure and with partners that are not fully in alignment, especially because all three countries share a common interest in seeing US international influence reduced.

With China, Russia, and North Korea moving more into alignment, there are certain policy shifts we should expect. Russia and China will increasingly provide political support to North Korea. On the issue of denuclearization, we should expect more trilateral conformity in policy even if not exact alignment. Beijing will continue in its lax enforcement of sanctions, and Moscow will continue to disregard them. Over time, this approach will further erode sanctions as third countries see continued lax enforcement or direct violations by China and Russia.

**중국은 비핵화 노력을 공식적으로 포기하지는
않겠지만, 제재 압박을 대화의 유인책으로
삼기보다는 러시아와 협력해 제재 완화를 통해
북한을 협상 테이블로 끌어들이려 할 것이다**

While China is unlikely to formally renounce efforts at denuclearization, it will instead work with Russia to push for sanctions relief as a means to bring North Korea to talks rather using sanctions pressure as an inducement for talks, similar to their earlier cooperation at the UN on sanctions relief.

Russia, which considers denuclearization a [“closed issue.”](#) will continue to back North Korea’s insistence that it is time to move beyond talks on denuclearization. Neither will apply significant pressure on North Korea to make concessions in return for sanctions relief.

Kim’s recent remarks on talks with the United States are reflective of this new dynamic. While Kim said that he had [“good memories”](#) of Trump, he suggested that North Korea would only engage in talks: “If the United States shuts down its hollow denuclearization ideology and wants a true peaceful coexistence with us based on acceptance of reality, then we have no reason not to [sit down with] the United States.” North Korea has long argued that the US must drop its “hostile” policies if it wants a better relationship, but Russia and China are unlikely to push Kim to alter this stance.

If the three countries are likely to take a trilateral approach to denuclearization and sanctions, they will also continue bilateral policies that alter the dynamics on the Korean Peninsula. While the eventual end of the war in Ukraine will change the nature of the relationship between Moscow and Pyongyang, we should expect the economic relationship to continue. The [Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Treaty](#) calls on both sides to increase trade, cooperate on free trade zones, and collaborate on science and technology. North Korea also has an interest in diversifying trade away from China, while continuing trade with North Korea is part of a larger push by Russia to [reorient its trade](#) away from the West. We should also expect the economic relationship between China and North Korea to continue its current trends towards expanded trade.

In particular, we should not discount the possibility of continued technology transfers from Russia to North Korea. Russia will likely want to rearm after the war and maintaining North Korea as a supplier would be part of these efforts. Additionally, continued tech flows that enhance North Korean weapons systems purchased by Russia bring benefits to both sides.

If the Singapore Summit represented the possibility of a new relationship between the United States and North Korea, China’s commemoration of the 80th anniversary of the end of the Second World War marks a new shift in cooperation between China, Russia, and North Korea. That shift will reverberate on the Korean Peninsula as North Korea becomes less constrained by sanctions, faces less pressure to denuclearize, and benefits from increased

**싱가포르 정상회담이 미·북 관계의
새로운 가능성을 열었다면, 제 2 차
세계대전 종전 80 주년을 기념한 중국의
전승절 행사는 북·중·러 협력이 새로운
국면으로 접어들었음을 알리는
전환점으로 평가할 수 있다**

economic engagement and continued technology transfers.

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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