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THE XI-KIM SUMMIT
AND THE SHIFTING GEOPOLITICS
OF NORTHEAST ASIA

BY ANDREW YEO



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Yeo is currently working on a project that examines the role of narratives in the formation of grand strategy, particularly in the context of South Korea. His research also covers U.S. alliances in Asia, Asia's regional architecture and institutional change, U.S. grand strategy and force posture, South Korean foreign policy, U.S.-North Korea relations, and North Korean human rights. As a scholar working at the intersection of international relations and comparative politics, he also has an interest in studying civil society, social and transnational movements, and democratization.



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시진핑-김정은 정상회담과 동북아 지정학의 변화

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JUNE 2026

On June 8–9, 2026, Chinese President Xi Jinping traveled to Pyongyang for a [summit](#) with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un. The visit followed two other high-profile meetings hosted by Xi in Beijing the previous month—with U.S. President [Donald Trump](#) on May 14–15 and Russian President [Vladimir Putin](#) on May 19–20. The flurry of summit diplomacy fueled speculation that Beijing might lay the groundwork for renewed U.S.-North Korea engagement, including a potential Trump-Kim meeting. However, the Xi-Kim summit concluded without any [mention](#) of U.S.-North Korea diplomacy or denuclearization. Although the summit offered more [pageantry](#) and [symbolism](#) than substantive policy outcomes, Xi's visit to Pyongyang highlighted three important realities shaping Northeast Asia today: 1) North Korea's growing strategic importance in regional politics; 2) China's effort to reinforce its influence over Pyongyang amid expanding Russia-North Korea ties; and 3) the uncertain prospects for renewed U.S.-North Korea diplomacy on the Korean Peninsula.

시진핑의 평양 방문은 세 가지 중요한 현실을 부각시켰다. 첫째, 지역 정치에서 북한의 전략적 중요성이 커지고 있다는 점이다. 둘째, 러시아와 북한 간 관계가 확대되는 가운데 중국이 평양에 대한 영향력을 강화하려 하고 있다는 점이다. 셋째, 미국과 북한 간 외교 재개 전망이 여전히 불확실하다는 점이다

North Korea's growing strategic importance

평양에서의 시진핑의 존재는 북한이 동북아 지정학에서 점점 더 중요한 행위자로 부상하고 있음을 베이징이 인식하고 있음을 보여주었다

The Xi-Kim summit underscored North Korea's increasing relevance in regional affairs. While official [Chinese](#) and [North Korean](#) readouts focused largely on strengthening bilateral ties and practical cooperation, Xi's presence in Pyongyang, his first

foreign trip of 2026, signaled Beijing's recognition that North Korea has become an increasingly consequential actor in Northeast Asian geopolitics. The visit elevated Kim Jong Un's diplomatic standing and potentially strengthened his leverage in any future dealings with Washington. The summit also capped a period of unusually active North Korean diplomacy. Since 2025, senior North Korean officials have met counterparts, including [Russia](#), [Belarus](#), [Vietnam](#), [Laos](#), and [Singapore](#).

This diplomatic momentum contrasts sharply with the image of North Korea as an isolated and declining state that dominated much of the post-Cold War era. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, some analysts predicted North Korea's eventual demise as it struggled through economic crisis and famine. However, North Korea managed to muddle through by generating revenue through illicit trade and letting informal markets emerge, both of which depended on Chinese state and nonstate actors' participation. China provided a critical economic lifeline, accounting for more than 80% of its total trade (and by some estimates, over 90%), but North Korea grew increasingly isolated amid international sanctions for its nuclear and missile development and remained economically dependent.

North Korea's self-imposed border closure during the COVID-19 again fueled speculation about regime instability and collapse. Since gradually reopening its borders in 2023, however, Kim Jong Un has appeared more confident than at any point during his fourteen-year rule. The impetus behind North Korea's rising status in regional affairs has been the regime's staunch support for Moscow in the Russia-Ukraine war.

The June 2024 Russia–North Korea Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Treaty formalized this growing alignment between Pyongyang and Moscow and highlighted North Korea's importance as a strategic partner for Russia. Since then, Kim Jong Un has sought to institutionalize the relationship beyond the Ukraine war through intensified official rhetoric celebrating bilateral ties and symbolic measures such as establishing a memorial honoring North Korean soldiers killed fighting alongside Russian forces.

Both Moscow and Beijing have compelling reasons to cultivate close ties with Pyongyang. Russia depends on North Korean military support for its war effort in Ukraine, while China seeks to maintain its influence on the Korean Peninsula and prevent North Korea from becoming overly dependent on Moscow. This dynamic has enhanced Kim Jong Un's bargaining power, allowing him to extract benefits from both partners while preserving strategic autonomy. As a result, Kim enjoys greater diplomatic leverage with both countries than at any point in recent years. North Korea's increasing reliance on Russia and China, coupled with its growing estrangement from the United States and its allies, reinforces Pyongyang's belief that international politics is entering a new Cold War defined by competing geopolitical camps. The resulting challenge for Washington is that Moscow and Beijing may, whether deliberately or inadvertently, continue to create conditions that facilitate North Korea's military modernization, including advances in its nuclear and missile capabilities.

그 결과 워싱턴이 직면한 도전은 모스크바와 베이징이 북한의 군사 현대화를 촉진하는 조건을 계속 조성할 수 있다는 점이다. 여기에는 북한의 핵 및 미사일 능력의 발전도 포함된다

China's Bid to Reassert Leadership in the China-Russia-North Korea Triangle

For much of the past two years, Russia has emerged as North Korea's most consequential strategic partner. By traveling to Pyongyang in May 2026, however, Xi sought to reassert Beijing's influence over its treaty ally, which has drawn significantly closer to Moscow since the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine war. Xi's meeting with Kim, coming shortly after hosting Trump and Putin in Beijing, reinforced China's message that it remains a central actor in shaping the regional order amid intensifying geopolitical competition.

At the bilateral level, Xi and Kim discussed expanding cross-border cooperation in various areas, including trade, tourism, and transportation. Chinese state media also referred to strengthening exchanges in diplomacy, law enforcement, and military affairs. Notably, North Korean media omitted any reference to military

exchanges. The discrepancy suggests that Beijing sought to highlight the comprehensive and strategic breadth of the relationship going beyond trade relations, whereas Pyongyang preferred to avoid signaling excessive dependence on China at a time when ties with Russia remain especially important.

**시진핑은 러시아-우크라이나 전쟁 발발 이후
모스크바와 상당히 가까워진 조약 동맹국
북한에 대해 베이징의 영향력을 재확인하고자
했다**

Additionally, Xi's successive meetings with Putin and Kim reinforced China's position as the pivotal actor connecting the three capitals. The China-Russia-North Korea trilateral, or the so-called “axis of upheaval” is not a formal alliance, but rather a set of overlapping bilateral partnerships driven by distinct, transactional interests. Nevertheless, the series of summits in spring 2026, including the Xi-Kim meeting, demonstrated Beijing's continued relevance in managing regional security dynamics.

**시진핑의 푸틴 및 김정은과의 연이은 회동은
중국이 세 수도를 연결하는 핵심 행위자라는
위치를 더욱 강화했다**

From a Xi-Kim to a Trump-Kim summit?

A key question is whether the Xi-Kim meeting will have some bearing on renewed U.S.-North Korea diplomacy, or possibly inter-Korean engagement. Given Xi's meeting with Trump just weeks before meeting Kim, and Beijing's interest in preserving influence over developments on the Korean Peninsula, it is possible that the two leaders may have exchanged views about Trump and the prospect of U.S.-North Korea diplomacy. Prior to the Xi-Kim summit, South Korea's Minister of Unification Chung Dong-young optimistically stated that a Kim-Trump summit “will 'surely'” be discussed if Xi travels to Pyongyang. The Lee Jae-myung government had also hoped for a possible thaw in inter-Korea relations when a North Korean women's soccer team's traveled to South Korea in late May for the Asian Football Confederation (AFC) Champion's League tournament in Suwon.

For now, however, little public evidence suggests that Pyongyang is prepared to return to formal negotiations. Although Kim in September 2025 expressed a willingness to resume diplomacy with the United States should

Washington “drop its hollow obsession with denuclearization” and seek “peaceful coexistence with North Korea based on the recognition of reality,” nothing in North Korea's recent rhetoric or diplomatic behavior

**북한의 최근 수사나 외교적 행보 어디에서도
김정은이 조기에 트럼프와의 회동을 모색하고
있음을 시사하는 징후는 보이지 않는다**

suggests that Kim is seeking an early meeting with Trump. In fact, in late May 2025, Singaporean Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan [met](#) his North Korean counterpart, Foreign Minister Choe Son-hui in Pyongyang and [reported](#) that the regime was “not yet ready to open up significant channels of communication with the United States or with ROK and Japan at this point in time.” During the Second Plenary Session of the Ninth Central Committee of the Workers Party in late June, Kim also [criticized](#) U.S-South Korea efforts at alliance modernization, including bilateral discussions related to extended nuclear deterrence and South Korea’s quest to acquire nuclear-powered submarines.

Among the recent series of high-level meetings involving Xi, Putin, Kim, and Trump, the only leader-to-leader meeting that has yet to occur is between Kim and Trump. Rubbing shoulders with Xi and Putin certainly increases Kim’s profile in the eyes of Trump who [respects strong](#) authoritarian leaders. At the same time, Kim, who has not criticized Trump directly, appears to be keeping his options open. Currently, North Korea is actively expanding its diplomatic reach with countries that do not pose an ideological challenge to his authoritarian rule. Kim may seek to further bolster North Korea's international legitimacy and strategic leverage before pursuing renewed diplomacy with Western countries, including the United States.

Conclusion

For U.S. policymakers, the principal lesson of the Xi-Kim summit is that North Korea is no longer operating from a position of diplomatic isolation. Growing support from Russia, sustained backing from China, and expanding ties with a wider set of partners have increased Kim Jong Un's confidence and reduced incentives for immediate negotiations.

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움직이고 있지 않다는 점이다**

**동시에 평양이 국제적 정당성을 원하고 있다는
점은 향후 외교의 기회가 완전히 사라진 것은
아님을 시사한다**

At the same time, Pyongyang's desire for international legitimacy suggests that opportunities for future diplomacy have not disappeared. Managing this more connected and strategically relevant North Korea will require Washington to

balance deterrence with openness to dialogue should political conditions eventually shift.

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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