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WHEN PYONGYANG ENTERS THE EUROPEAN THEATER: THE RUSSIA–NORTH KOREA AXIS, THE BEIJING SUMMITS, AND THE NEW GEOGRAPHY OF EURO-ASIAN SECURITY

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AUTHOR'S PRESENTATION



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AN EXTERNAL INTRUDER IN EUROPE'S WAR

The war in Ukraine played a crucial role in changing the European security order. It brought deterrence back to the centre of security strategy, with the enlargement of North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and a reconsideration of the assumption that economic interdependence would constrain a revisionist state's aggressive behaviour. Its impact extended beyond Europe and Russia to the rest of the world, including the United States (US), Canada, Australia, Japan and South Korea on the side supporting Ukraine, and Iran, Belarus and, more recently, North Korea on the side supporting Russia. The war therefore carries direct implications for the Korean Peninsula and Europe.

Of the states supporting Russia, North Korea has deployed ground forces to the theatre. As the war lengthened, Russia came to face shortages of manpower and materiel, and North Korea — one of the few states to have endorsed the invasion of Ukraine outright — became its solution. The relationship was placed on a new legal footing by the Treaty on Comprehensive Strategic Partnership of 19 June 2024, whose Article 4 contains a mutual military assistance clause, and was given operational content by the deployment of ground forces to Kursk Oblast. It should be stated at the outset that the arms transfers and troop deployments examined in this paper is prohibited under the arms embargo and associated measures imposed by United Nations (UN) Security Council Resolutions 1718 (2006) and 1874 (2009) and reinforced through Resolution 2397 (2017) and others, all of which the Russian government voted for and which remain formally in force.

The compensation North Korea received appears to have been diplomatic as well as material. The regime which had been diplomatically isolated for almost two decades, thereby acquired a treaty relationship with a permanent member of the UN Security Council. The war has returned the Russia–North Korea relationship to something close to the military alliance it had been under the 1961 “Treaty of Friendship, Co-operation and Mutual Assistance”, ending the isolation of a state geographically remote from the conflict and widening its diplomatic space.

The military cooperation between Russia and North Korea is proximately a consequence of the war's prolongation. Structurally, however, it reflects the shifting international order that has followed changes in American foreign policy, and the corresponding rise in North Korea's political and security value to Beijing and Moscow. South Korea, the US and Japan strengthened security cooperation at the Camp David summit of 2023. Under the second Trump administration, an approach to alliance management that has been widely

characterised in the policy literature as transactional,¹ together with signals of a willingness to negotiate directly with Pyongyang, has sharpened defence cooperation among allies surrounding the Korean Peninsula whilst also raising questions in allied capitals about the terms on which that cooperation will proceed.

Within this configuration, North Korea, China and Russia have each sought to respond to the changing order by deepening bilateral cooperation. Russia required a partner with immediately available munitions capacity and manpower, and the only state meeting that description was North Korea. Pyongyang has in turn used this position to strengthen its diplomatic leverage against Washington. Sino-Russian cooperation, built up since the mid-1990s, reached an unprecedented level during the war in Ukraine, and the Russia–North Korea relationship tightened further after the Treaty of June 2024. China and North Korea, for their part, resumed leader-level contact in September 2025. In June 2026, North Korea received Xi Jinping in Pyongyang for the first state visit in seven years, in a further instance of bilateral consolidation.

Some observers have accordingly asked whether a North Korea-China–Russia triangle is taking shape in opposition to the South Korea-US-Japan partnership, and whether the war is hardening the division of the region into two groups. Yet no trilateral summit, ministers' meeting or combined exercise has been held to date, and China has consistently characterised the Russia–North Korea Treaty as a matter between two sovereign states while declining to comment on the troop deployment. Taken together, these facts indicate that trilateral cooperation among the three has not been institutionalised in the manner of the South Korea-US–Japan partnership.

This paper examines the current state of Russia–North Korea military cooperation and tests, against China's posture and the record of summit diplomacy, whether it is evolving into a North Korea-China–Russia triangle arrayed against the South Korea-US–Japan format. It then draws out the consequences for the security of the Korean peninsula, of Asia more broadly, and of Europe.

¹ Valérie Niquet, "Vers une convergence Union européenne-Japon face aux recompositions géopolitiques ? " *Note de la FRS*, n° 14/2025, Paris: Fondation pour la Recherche Stratégique (2025)
 Guilain Denoeux and Robert Springborg, "Trump's Transactional Diplomacy: Breakthrough or Breakdown?" , *Middle East Policy*, Vol. 33 Issue 2 (Summer 2026): 24-40
 Max Bergmann, "Transatlantic Relations Under Trump: An Uneasy Peace", CSIS (2026).

INSTITUTIONALISATION OF THE RUSSIA–NORTH KOREA AXIS

The relationship between Moscow and Pyongyang dates from the division of the peninsula. The Soviet Union sponsored North Korea from 1945 and, in July 1961, formalised that patronage in a treaty. Article 1 of the Treaty of Friendship stipulated that, if one of the two countries were attacked and drawn into war, the other was to give military and other help “without delay and by all means at its disposal”. This Treaty was the core of North Korean security policy for more than thirty years.

Yet it did not survive the end of the Cold War. The Soviet Union normalised relations with Seoul in September 1990, and Russia thereafter pursued a broader reorientation towards the West through the NATO–Russia Founding Act (1997), membership of the G8 (1998), the NATO–Russia Council (2002), gas integration with Europe with Nord Stream 1 (2011) and, eventually, World Trade Organization (WTO) accession (2012). By the mid-1990s, maintaining a client state in Northeast Asia already offered Moscow little benefit. The Treaty of Friendship accordingly lapsed. Moscow gave notice in 1995 that it would not be renewed, and the Treaty expired in 1996.

This shift imposed two distinct costs on Pyongyang. Russia voted for all the sanctions resolutions of the UN Security Council between 2006 and 2017, so that North Korea faced the sanctions regime without a protector. Its trade with Russia also collapsed from USD 76.9 million in 2016 to roughly USD 0.04 million in 2021. As a result, Pyongyang routed its commerce through China, whose share in North Korea’s trade passed 90 % in 2014 and reached 98.3 % by 2023.²

This situation changed over roughly thirty months following the outbreak of the war in Ukraine. North Korea recognised the Donetsk and Luhansk “republics” in July 2022, and Kim Jong Un travelled to the Vostochny cosmodrome in September 2023, followed by the first munitions shipments in the same year. In March 2024, Russia vetoed the renewal of the UN Panel of Experts, ending fifteen years of independent sanctions monitoring. Three months later, at the Pyongyang summit of 19 June 2024, the two signed the Treaty on Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. Article 4 of the Treaty restored the old formula, providing for assistance “without delay and by all means” in the event of armed attack, although it now cites Article 51 of the UN Charter and each side’s domestic law, which could be read as leaving Moscow more discretion than the 1961 text did. Article 22 provided that the Treaty would enter into force upon the exchange of instruments of ratification, which took place on 4 December 2024,

² Korea Trade-Investment Promotion Agency (KOTRA), “북한 대외무역 동향” (2019-2024).

and that the Treaty of Friendship, Good-Neighborliness and Cooperation of 9 February 2000 would cease to have effect from that date. That instrument had held the Russia-North Korea relationship at the level of good-neighborly consultation for almost 25 years and had been the formal marker of Pyongyang's demotion in Russian foreign policy.

In return for Pyongyang's support in Ukraine, Moscow has softened its public position on North Korea's nuclear weapons programme, moving from support for denuclearisation toward a posture that treats North Korea's possession of nuclear weapons as a fact to be accommodated. As North Korea cannot acquire the status of a nuclear-weapon State under the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), its program violates multiple United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolutions. The Russia's legal position has not changed, but diplomatic stance has shifted. This change of circumstances - Russia's military and diplomatic support for North Korea, together with its resumption of energy, food and financial assistance - has loosened North Korea's dependence on Beijing.³ Western governments assessed that the Treaty had restored the Russia-North Korea relationship in form, and that the question was whether it would be given operational content.

The record of transfers from North Korea to Russia is incomplete, but its principal components are documented.⁴ From September 2023 onward, North Korea shipped large quantities of artillery ammunition and related materiel such as 122 mm and 152 mm artillery shells, Bulsae-4 anti-tank guided missiles, short-range ballistic missiles such as the KN-23, and RPG anti-tank rockets, a volume that the National Intelligence Service (NIS) of South Korea estimated in October 2024 at around 13,000 containers.⁵ Each of these categories falls within the arms embargo established by Resolution 1718 and extended by Resolution 1874, which prohibits transfers both to and from North Korea. The cooperation was not, however, confined to weapons.

Personnel followed in October 2024. The NIS confirmed on 18 October 2024 that some 1,500 North Korean soldiers had been transported to Vladivostok.⁶ They were trained by Russia in artillery, Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV) and basic infantry operations including trench clearing before being deployed to Kursk Oblast. The arrangement engages the sanctions

³ U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence, *Annual Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community* (March 2025):26-28.

⁴ The empirical base for any assessment of Russia-North Korea cooperation is uneven. Multilateral reporting by the Multilateral Sanctions Monitoring Team rests on the pooled national assessments of its participating states and is the most systematic material publicly available, but it is not the product of a body with a Security Council mandate and its coverage is necessarily partial.

⁵ NIS, "국정원, 북한 특수부대 러-우크라 전쟁 참전 확인", Press release, 18 October 2024.

⁶ *Ibid.*

regime at two points. The training itself falls within the prohibition on the provision to North Korea of technical training, advice and assistance related to the use of arms, established by Resolution 1718 (2006). The dispatch of North Korean nationals to earn income abroad is separately restricted under Resolution 2397 (2017), which required their repatriation, although the application of that provision to military personnel rather than to contract labourers has not been formally determined. The South Korean government has criticised Russia-North Korea military cooperation as a violation of UNSC resolutions affecting its security environment and has consistently called for its immediate cessation. As reported to the Intelligence Committee of the National Assembly by the NIS in September 2025, fatalities were estimated at approximately 2,000, whereas Pyongyang has itself acknowledged far fewer.⁷

The transfers were reciprocal, and both parties derived benefits from the arrangement. For Moscow, the benefits were immediate and largely tactical, as North Korean supplies sustained an artillery-intensive campaign and North Korean personnel filled a manpower gap at a moment when further domestic mobilisation by the Russian government carried political risk.

The benefits accruing to Pyongyang were of a different characteristic. Materially, the Multilateral Sanctions Monitoring Team (MSMT)⁸ reports that Russia supplied short-range air defence systems and electronic warfare equipment, including jamming systems and at least one Pantsir-class vehicle.⁹ It should be noted that the publicly documented transfers are concentrated at the conventional and defensive end of the spectrum. Transfers in the areas that would most alter the strategic balance – satellite and space-launch technology, submarine propulsion, re-entry vehicle design – have been the subject of allied concern and of repeated speculation but have not been established in open sources.

Financially, North Korea's external earnings between 2022 and 2025 have been estimated at up to USD 22 billion, said to be roughly four times the total recorded in the preceding four years.¹⁰ The estimate is an upper bound derived from modelling whose assumptions and scope of coverage are not disclosed, and it should be treated as an order-of-magnitude

⁷ Briefing by the National Intelligence Service to the National Assembly Intelligence Committee, 2 September 2025, as reported in "[속보] 국정원 "우크라이나 파병 북한군 사망자 2천여명 추산"", 연합뉴스, September 2, 2025.

⁸ The MSMT is a multilateral mechanism to monitor and report violations and evasions of UN sanctions on North Korea following the dissolution of the Panel of Experts by Russian veto in March 2024, and it operates outside the UN framework and without a Security Council mandate. As of August 2026, its participating states are 11 countries including France, Germany, Italy, Japan, South Korea, the United Kingdom and the US.

⁹ U.S. Department of State, Office of the Spokesperson, *MSMT Report on Unlawful North Korea-Russia Military Cooperation (July 17, 2025)*, <https://state.gov/releases/office-of-the-spokesperson/2025/07/msmt-report-on-unlawful-north-korea-russia-military-cooperation> (accessed on August 23, 2026).

¹⁰ Cat Barton and al., *North Korea's Kim Jong Un Gains \$22 Billion Windfall Despite Sanctions*, Bloomberg, August 7, 2026.

indication. In military terms, a force with no experience of large-scale combat since 1953 has been exposed to drone warfare, electronic warfare and contemporary artillery employment. The most significant point for North Korea, however, was diplomatic rather than material. A state which had been diplomatically isolated for almost two decades acquired a UNSC patron and gained a counterweight to its overwhelming dependence on Beijing which had accounted for over 90 % of North Korea's trade since 2014.

A TRIANGLE THAT HAS NOT CLOSED: TESTING THE BEIJING VARIABLE

It has been widely suggested that the Russia–North Korea axis forms one side of a triangle whose second side is the Sino-Russian alignment consolidated since February 2022, and that the resulting grouping stands arrayed against the South Korea-US–Japan format established at Camp David in 2023. Two of the three sides – Russia and North Korea, and Russia and China – are stronger than they were four years ago, and all three states share an interest in contesting American primacy. Yet a trilateral relationship can be said to exist only when a third side, between North Korea and China, has formed.

On the available evidence, Beijing has kept its options open rather than committed itself. China has never characterised the Russia–North Korea Treaty as anything other than a bilateral matter between two sovereign states, and when asked about the deployment of North Korean troops in Russia, it has consistently declined to confirm or deny. The vote of 28 March 2024 is more telling. Russia vetoed the renewal of the UN Panel of Experts, while China abstained. The abstention implies that Beijing did not object to the lapse of the monitoring mechanism on North Korea but preferred not to be formally recorded as responsible for ending it. This distance appears to derive from structural considerations rather than from any cooling of political sentiment. A more heavily militarised Korean peninsula would not serve Chinese interests. From Beijing's perspective, North Korean provocation can supply grounds for trilateral defence cooperation among South Korea, the US, and Japan, inviting the forward deployment of American strategic assets and accelerating a military build-up near China's border.

Beijing also has reason for concern regarding which external power holds influence in Pyongyang. Russian energy, technology and diplomatic cover have loosened a dependence that ran through China alone. Whilst China's share in North Korea's trade has been above 90 % since 2014, the strengthening of the Russia-North Korea relationship has reduced the leverage that dependence conferred. Xi Jinping's state visit to Pyongyang in June 2026, his first in seven

years, may be understood primarily as an effort to recover that lost influence, rather than as evidence of triangular consolidation.

Convergence among the three is evident at the level of discourse. The Sino-Russian joint statement of May 2026 opposed the use of diplomatic isolation, economic sanctions and military pressure against North Korea and omitted any reference to denuclearisation. It is a reversal of the joint statement Russia and China issued in July 2017, which had named North Korea's violations of UNSC resolutions and urged compliance.¹¹ The 2026 summit produced a Tuman River¹² development initiative that named all three states. This is the first instance in which trilateral cooperation has been given an explicit form, and it marks a real change in the economic domain. Whether it also marks the closing of the third side depends on the standard applied. Since the comparison drawn throughout is with the South Korea-US-Japan format, whose consolidation is measured by military institutionalisation, the same standard is used here. Yet nothing comparable exists in the military domain: no trilateral consultative mechanism, no combined exercises, no shared planning, and no Chinese participation of any kind in the Ukrainian theatre.

The Beijing commemoration of 3 September 2025 illustrates the point. The leaders of North Korea, China and Russia appeared together in public for the first time in the post-Cold War period, yet the occasion produced only bilateral meetings, and no trilateral meeting was convened or announced. The gathering may therefore be taken to demonstrate parallel alignment among the three, without indicating that a trilateral format has been established. It is therefore more reasonable to say that it is not a triangle but a set of asymmetric bilateral relationships pointing in a common direction. Russia and North Korea are bound by treaty and by transaction, whilst Russia and China are aligned on the ordering of the international system, and China and North Korea have resumed a relationship neither side allowed to lapse entirely. The three states have established neither a shared long-term objective nor a common institutional framework, and there is little evidence that any of them is prepared to accept risk on behalf of the others.

The contrast with the South Korea-US-Japan format is one of kind rather than of degree. This format now rests on a trilateral secretariat announced in November 2024, a signed Trilateral Security Cooperation Framework, and the Freedom Edge multi-domain exercise series, none

¹¹ The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, Joint statement by the Russian and Chinese foreign ministries on the Korean Peninsula's problems, 2017. 7. 4., https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1549360/ (accessed on August 23, 2026).

¹² The river is referred to throughout as the Tuman, following the McCune-Reischauer romanisation of the Korean name (Tuman-gang), rather than Tumen, which renders the Chinese form Túmenjiāng; the two designate the same river, which forms N. Korea's northern boundary with China and, along its final stretch of roughly 16 km, with Russia.

of which has any counterpart among the three states considered here. The comparison is employed as a measure of structural depth, and not as a claim that the South Korea-US-Japan format is itself uncontested. Security cooperation between South Korea and Japan carries a domestic political burden that the other two legs of the format do not, arising from historical questions that remain unresolved in Korean and Japanese public opinion. The suspension and subsequent reinstatement of the bilateral intelligence-sharing arrangement between 2019 and 2023 indicates how rapidly that constraint can operate. Institutional density is therefore evidence about form rather than a guarantee of durability, and the standard applied here should be read accordingly. Whether that difference persists is an open question, but the indicators required to demonstrate that such a triangle exists have not so far been presented.

CONSEQUENCES FOR THE KOREAN PENINSULA, JAPAN, CHINA AND EUROPE

The effects of the Russia–North Korea axis, and of Beijing's cautious accommodation of it, are distributed unevenly across three theatres.

First, on the Korean peninsula, the consequences fall simultaneously across the military, diplomatic and economic domains. The most immediate consequence for Seoul may be a shift in the military balance, the extent of which cannot yet be assessed with confidence. The air defence and electronic warfare systems Russia has supplied, together with the combat experience North Korean troops have acquired in Ukraine, are likely to have improved the capabilities of a force that had not previously operated under contemporary conditions. In August 2026 President Zelensky stated that a decision had been taken to deploy between 30,000 and 50,000 North Korean troops to Russian territory. This figure has not been independently verified. Were it accurate, the effect would extend beyond discrete capability transfers to the doctrine of the Korean People's Army as a whole, as returning veterans are distributed through the force as instructors.

The diplomatic consequence concerns the frame in which the peninsula is now discussed. In late 2023, North Korea redefined its approach to inter-Korean relations in more adversarial terms, dismantling the institutions that had carried out inter-Korean affairs. The reformulation followed the opening to Moscow and was arguably made possible by it, since a state that has acquired an alternative patron and an alternative source of revenue no longer requires the inter-Korean channel as a route to sanctions relief. For Seoul the effect is to close the principal

instrument through which it had sought to manage the North, and to close it for reasons outside its control.

The economic consequences have been mixed, and their diplomatic implications require more careful statement than is usually given them. Seoul's participation in the sanction's regime involved a substantial economic cost: the Russian market it had spent thirty years building contracted considerably. For example, Korean firms, such as Hyundai Motor, wound down or sold their Russian operations. At the same time, defence cooperation between South Korea and European countries whose stocks had been depleted by transfers to Ukraine has been strengthened by Korea's capacity to deliver at scale and on schedule, as the Polish contracts of 2022 illustrate. Alongside this, South Korea has maintained a policy of providing only non-lethal assistance, which survived the confirmation of North Korea's deployment in October 2024.

For Japan, the geopolitical shift around North Korea has become a regional concern of a larger order. Tokyo has responded by intensifying its participation in the alliance framework with the US and South Korea, formalised at Camp David and by bringing its Russian policy into line with Europe's.

China's position is mixed. The division of American attention between two theatres works to its advantage, whereas a militarised peninsula, closer South Korea-US-Japan cooperation and reduced influence over Pyongyang do not.

The consequences for Europe begin with the war itself. North Korean ammunition and troops have extended Russia's capacity to sustain an attritional campaign, raising the cost and duration of the conflict for European states. Europe has found that a security problem originating in Asia now bears materially on the course of the war in Europe and has to confront North Korean support alongside Russian capability.

Economically, the burden on Europe is indirect but substantial. A longer war means increased defence expenditure, prolonged energy adjustment and a larger eventual reconstruction bill, and it has exposed the thinness of European ammunition production. Europe has met the shortfall through procurement from Asian suppliers, which has further increased the interdependence of the two regions.

European and Asian security are less separable than they were and treating them as distinct policy areas is becoming harder to sustain. A ceasefire in Ukraine would bring the transactions to an end, but their effects would persist. The 2024 Treaty would presumably continue in force, and the transferred capabilities would remain in North Korean hands.

CONCLUSION

The North Korea-China-Russia triangle asserted by several experts has not, on the available evidence, taken shape. What exists is a set of asymmetric bilateral relationships, one bound by treaty and transaction, another by a shared view of international order, and a third only recently resumed. The relationships point in a broadly similar direction, but without a shared objective or institutional basis. This conclusion should not be read as reassuring. An institutionalised block can be deterred and eventually negotiated with, whereas an alignment assembled and reassembled according to immediate need is less predictable and provides fewer opportunities for external influence. Both overstating the degree of trilateral consolidation and underestimating what has in fact been developed would lead to policy error.

Whether that judgement holds is an empirical question, and three indicators may offer a provisional answer. The first is form. The convening of a trilateral summit, a minister-level meeting or a combined exercise, none of which has yet occurred, would mark a change in kind rather than in degree. The second is China's threshold. Beijing's convergence has so far been confined to discourse and economics, the omission of denuclearisation from the May 2026 joint statement and the Tuman River initiative being the clearest instances. Whether it extends into the military domain is the variable that determines whether the third side closes. The observable threshold is participation in a mechanism with a standing agenda and identified military counterparts, as distinct from parallel expressions of position. The third is what survives a ceasefire. The transactions will end, but the Treaty will remain in force. This raises the possibility that a permanent member of the Council may continue to erode the effectiveness of the sanction's regime, even where the underlying resolutions stay formally in effect. What emerges after the exchange ends will indicate whether the relationship constituted an alliance of convenience or something more durable.

The comparison employed here may not hold indefinitely. The durability of the Camp David system depends on political continuity in three democracies, which is bound to be tested. The institutional mechanisms established since 2024 were designed in part to address precisely that vulnerability, and their durability has not yet been tested across a full political cycle in all three states. Whatever the future of either grouping, the linkage created by the war is unlikely to be easily reversed.

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