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North Korea, Russia, and China: Past Cooperation & Future Prospects

By Syd Seiler

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Major geopolitical shifts are rare, difficult to identify, or otherwise misinterpreted as they unfold. Episodic and opportunistic interactions among states may be overinterpreted as being part of a grand strategy, the result of conspiratorial coordination and cooperation and having much greater substance and sustainability than they entail. Shifts based upon personalities and personal relationships between leaders may be ascribed more endurance and sustainability than they deserve.

Those cautions aside, there are numerous reasons to be concerned about the recent developments in relations between North Korea, Russia, and China. As the nature of the North Korea-Russia relationship over the past few years moved beyond arms deals to a more dangerous strategic partnership, the evolution of North Korea-Russia cooperation has been the most potentially destabilizing development on the Korean Peninsula in decades. Motivations such as Moscow's need for munitions to sustain its military operations in Ukraine and Pyongyang's need to circumvent sanctions and pressure appear likely to continue over the near term. Beijing's reluctance to apply pressure on Pyongyang for its illicit missile launches, on Russia for its military aggression in Ukraine, and on both North Korea and Russia for their recent cooperation is a reminder that these three countries, their shared values, and their overlapping interests pose risks to regional and international security.

It is thus natural to worry about new developments in North Korea-China-Russia relations as they openly challenge the United States, its allies, and its interests. Yet, it is also important to examine these dynamics within the context of past interactions that served to limit just how effective, sustained, and thus threatening such trilateral ties have been to the geopolitical order in Northeast Asia.

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Note: Views expressed in this paper are mine and do not imply endorsement by the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, the Intelligence Community, or any other US Government agency.

Toward this end, this article examines North Korea-China-Russia relations within the context of North Korea's geopolitical reality and foreign policy over the past several decades, briefly examining North Korea's relationships with China and the Soviet Union during the Cold War; how North Korea navigated these relations during its post-Cold War nuclear and missile pursuit; recent developments in relations since 2020; and what trilateralism might look like in this newly emerging world order by focusing on the potential risk of increased North Korean aggression resulting from a newfound boldness and brutality encouraged by trilateral alignment.

Cold War Northeast Asia: Challenges For Pyongyang

The experience of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK, or North Korea) throughout the Cold War was marked by tumultuous ebbs and flows in its relationships with the People's Republic of China (PRC, or China) and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR, or the Soviet Union). Some of the events, upheavals, and changes were unique to that period. Yet, at the same time, principles that applied then continue to apply today, providing insight into possibilities that might mark a New Cold War construct for the Korean Peninsula.

DPRK-USSR: A Strained Patron-Client Relationship

Relations between North Korea, the Soviet Union, and China were far from strong and steady since the beginning of the Cold War. The Soviet hand was dominant in installing Kim Il-sung as North Korea's leader in 1945 and building the government, party, and military structures necessary for the regime to survive.¹ Yet five years later in 1950, it was China that provided the necessary forces to prevent a humiliating defeat for North Korea in the Korean War. Changes in the post-Stalin Soviet Union were perceived by Kim Il-sung as both ideologically and practically threatening to the legitimacy of his regime, which was modeled after the Stalinist Soviet Union. For their part, post-Stalin Soviet leaders felt comfortable distancing themselves from North Korea, seeing little value in the relationship ideologically, economically, and geopolitically.

A mutual defense treaty between the Soviet Union and North Korea was concluded in 1961.² Although somewhat mirroring the 1953 US-ROK Mutual Defense Treaty, the USSR-DPRK treaty was marked by skepticism in Pyongyang about Moscow's willingness to risk nuclear war with Washington to come to its rescue.³ Confrontation with the United States, Europe, and China dominated the Soviet Union's geopolitical priorities. Moscow never provided the type and volume of support to move North Korea from surviving to thriving, while Kim Il-sung carefully avoided North Korea's full integration into the Soviet

Union's economic and trade structure so as to maximize autonomy and avoid developing dependencies on the Soviet Union. North Korea's view toward the Soviet Union further deteriorated as détente between Moscow and Washington advanced, initial market reforms were introduced in the Soviet Union, and eventually, the Soviet Union itself collapsed.

DPRK-PRC: Lips and Teeth?

China, too, never had a sustained motivation nor available resources to become a reliable partner, let alone a major benefactor, of North Korea during the Cold War. Beijing's depiction of the PRC-DPRK relationship as being one of "lips and teeth" was erroneously interpreted by some outsiders as reflecting inherently inseparable closeness and fraternity between two close allies. Instead, "lips and teeth" merely described a geographic reality of a shared border that necessitated China's intervention in the Korean War to maintain a buffer state between China and the US-occupied South Korea.⁴ China was inclined to think about the Korean Peninsula more in geopolitical and security terms, and thus the aid provided by China to help rebuild North Korea in the immediate aftermath of the Korean War was pragmatic and crucial to Chinese interests.⁵ This need to bankroll the North would diminish over time. After the Korean War and the departure of the Chinese People's Volunteer forces from North Korea in 1958, a mutual hands-off and distanced approach served both countries well: Pyongyang could minimize Beijing's leverage or influence over its governance, while Beijing avoided any need to invest significantly in its neighbor as it lacked both the resources and interests to do so. As China began to experience economic growth through reform and opening up, Pyongyang once again found itself at ideological odds with a communist ally, which only worsened as Beijing later expanded its ties with Seoul.

North Korea: Marginalized and Isolated by Design

North Korea was able to pursue a distanced approach toward its two biggest partners and neighbors while maintaining its autonomous isolation due to the low priority Beijing and Moscow placed on their respective relations with Pyongyang. There was no real interaction between the three countries that would meet the definition of "trilateralism," and even the bilateral relations Pyongyang enjoyed with its two neighbors and ideological comradery during the good times were dwarfed in impact by US alliances with the ROK and Japan. It was by choice that Kim Il-sung avoided closer relations with China and the Soviet Union, while the latter two saw no particular value in forcing Kim into a relationship he was otherwise reluctant to pursue.

1988-2019: Pyongyang's Thirty-Year Nuclear-Based Survival Strategy

Although the DPRK leadership had long contemplated the military and geopolitical advantages of possessing nuclear weapons prior to the geopolitical transformation of the Socialist Bloc in the early 1990s, the collapse of the Cold War structure made such weapons critical to the regime's long-term survival.⁶ The challenge would be both technical and diplomatic: securing materials, designing devices, developing delivery vehicles, and ultimately deploying such capabilities would have to be done in a manner that did not generate intolerable levels of diplomatic blowback.

Existential Crisis

By the end of the 1980s, trouble was already emerging for North Korea with drastic changes in China, the weakening and ultimate collapse of the Soviet Union and the Socialist Bloc, and South Korean advances in the political, diplomatic, and economic spheres. North Korea became left behind in the zero-sum competition with South Korea, and even its military advantage over the South was beginning to erode.⁷ These setbacks went beyond symbolic to what could be termed existential. How could North Korea survive in a world where other like-minded states – autocratic socialist regimes, some with whom North Korea had close ties – began to fall one by one? To whom could North Korea turn if its two top benefactors, China and Russia, were now seeing more value in good relations with South Korea? How could Pyongyang contemplate reconciliation and normalization with Seoul and Washington without risking the weakening of its regime and control mechanisms?

Response: Deterrence, Development, Diplomacy

Pyongyang commenced three major lines of effort to ensure regime survival in an increasingly hostile world during the 1990s.

- 1. Hold Seoul hostage.** Well before North Korea had nuclear weapons, it secured the ability to hold large numbers of civilian and military targets at risk through the forward deployment of hundreds of long-range artillery guns capable of striking the greater Seoul metropolitan area. This investment proved wise over time: any consideration of military action by the United States against the North – whether in the pursuit of regime change during a collapse contingency or to roll back its growing nuclear program – was taken off the table given the threat of high civilian casualties in the opening stage of any conceived scenario.

2. Develop, demonstrate, and deploy a viable nuclear capability.

Although some date Kim Il-sung's intent to develop nuclear weapons as far back as the 1950s,⁸ it was in the early 1990s that Pyongyang's nuclear weapons program began to grow in earnest: first with the commencement of plutonium production through reprocessing spent fuel rods from a graphite moderated reactor, and second with the pursuit of a highly enriched uranium path to weapons-usable nuclear material.⁹ The march was slow, methodical, and incremental – reflecting the reality that North Korea did not perceive an urgent and imminent security threat – but strategic in nature, seeking to reestablish dominance on the Korean Peninsula and later declare an ability to subjugate the South.¹⁰

3. Buy time and seek concessions through charm offensives.

From the early 1990s, North Korea began to leverage periods of dialogue and restrained behavior to mitigate pressure, discourage the consideration of military options to end its nuclear program, and seek short-term concessions to monetize, albeit so far to a modest degree, its nuclear status. These periods of charm – particularly high-level inter-Korean talks from 1990 to 1992, the inter-Korean summit in June 2000 and the subsequent visit of Madeleine Albright to Pyongyang in October 2000, the Six-Party Talks period between 2003 and 2008, US-DPRK talks during the Obama administration, and the charm offensive between 2018 and 2019 that included two summits with President Trump – all bought time for the nuclear and missile programs to advance while creating in no sustained progress toward either denuclearization or the improvement of relations with the United States and South Korea.¹¹ The true value of these periods of diplomacy was allowing North Korea to deter and deflect excessive political, economic, and military pressure as its weapons program grew incrementally and steadily.

Nuclearization While Navigating Beijing and Moscow

When it came to relations with Beijing and Moscow between the early 1990s and 2019, this period was not easy for Pyongyang, yet it was one that it successfully navigated by proceeding at a pace sufficiently measured to avoid crossing any red lines for any of the players involved. Certainly, North Korea wished it had more support from China and Russia. North Korea had been one of the first countries to applaud China's first nuclear test.¹² However, China had no congratulatory message for North Korea's first test in October 2006. Meanwhile, Russia has consistently insisted on North Korea's denuclearization.

Although neither China nor Russia were the most committed enforcers of sanctions and pressure on North Korea, they also did not provide North Korea with anything but a bare minimum lifeline.

PRC: Please Remain Calm

China's position during these years of North Korea's nuclear and missile growth was one consistently articulated in its public talking points: stability first, denuclearization second.¹³ Unable to moderate Pyongyang's behavior, Beijing sought to contain and discourage Washington from moving down a more aggressive path or exploiting the North Korean issue to the detriment of China's interests. Beijing's episodic cooperation with Washington in applying pressure on Pyongyang was greatest when it feared more aggressive US action. Such was the case when China shut off oil flow to North Korea in March 2003 following its Taepo Dong-2 rocket launch and subsequently pressured North Korea to come to the Six-Party Talks out of fear military options were being considered during the early years of the Bush administration in 2002 and 2003.¹⁴ In 2017, China's acceptance of higher-impact sanctions on North Korea through United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolutions was driven by concerns about options Beijing believed were being considered by the Trump administration. Chinese pressure on North Korea was the bare minimum necessary to restrain US actions while simultaneously avoiding, as much as possible, squandering its limited leverage with Pyongyang in a way that might otherwise backfire, raise tensions, and potentially lead to conflict on its doorstep. Short of such concerns, Beijing continues to show a high tolerance for North Korea's missile-related provocations and will likely ultimately accept a seventh nuclear test, if and when it comes.

Russia: Right Beside China

Russia's policy toward North Korea during this period was, generally speaking, to follow China's lead. Russian foreign policy primarily focused on Europe, with the overarching interest in Asia being its relations with China. Thus, the Korean Peninsula was simply not a priority for Russia. Likely, Russia calculated that it had little practical leverage with North Korea, could gain political points by deferring to China's lead, and would be sufficiently able to dodge pressure from the United States to do more. Its participation in the Six-Party Talks sought to project an image of being a major player on the issue, but Russia ultimately and somewhat pragmatically avoided playing a larger role out of the same assessment that it had limited leverage to discourage either Kim Jong-il or Kim Jong-un from going down their desired path.

The DPRK Perspective

Pyongyang's diplomacy with Beijing and Moscow over the course of its thirty-plus year development of a nuclear weapons capability was a mix of managing their demands to come to the negotiating table, mitigating pressure from both powers after high-profile nuclear and missile testing, and pleading the case that US hostile policy justified its nuclear pursuit. Neither Beijing nor Moscow abandoned the goal of denuclearization in their respective public statements or enforcement of sanctions on North Korea. Nor did they give Pyongyang the impression it was succeeding in its broader diplomatic goal of gaining acceptance as a nuclear power. As long as China and Russia were still going through the motions of working within the existing rules-based order, North Korea would be frustrated with its inability to gain acceptance for its nuclear program from either country. However, those days now look to be far behind the current geopolitical context.

2020-Today: Inching Beyond Denuclearization

The period between Pyongyang's short-lived charm offensive in 2018 and 2019 to the present represents a transitional period for North Korea. Pyongyang's goal for decades has been to gradually build tolerance of its nuclear actions and eventually secure acceptance of its nuclear-armed status in the international arena. The question is now whether developments in the North Korea-China-Russia triangle will validate North Korea's long-standing optimism that it can endure isolation and pressure without engaging in denuclearization negotiations.

DPRK's Confident Isolation

North Korea's current hard-line refusal to engage in any type of dialogue that includes the nuclear issue was the "new way" Kim Jong-un warned of first in his New Year's address on January 1, 2019.¹⁵ One year later, Kim declared a "Head-On Breakthrough Offensive" in a report delivered at the Fifth Plenum of the Seventh Party Congress of the Workers' Party of Korea released on January 1, 2020. Kim declared that the country must assume "as a fait accompli" a "protracted period of living under sanctions" and that a combination of austerity and self-reliance would be necessary to overcome the current situation.¹⁶ With isolation, austerity, and self-reliance declared as the path forward for North Korea, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the implementation of such principles.

With Kim having mapped out a way forward that minimized the importance of diplomacy, North Korea could resume ballistic missile launches in 2019 and accelerate them over the next few years with little concern about their implications for diplomacy with either the United States and South Korea, dialogue with whom had been abandoned, or with Russia and China, whom Kim likely assumed would probe for re-engagement once COVID-related restrictions were eased. In the meantime, Chinese and Russian refusal to take action supporting UNSC resolutions in response to North Korean launches from 2019 onward reaffirmed the logic of Kim's path. Although he did not formally secure Beijing and Moscow's blessings for Pyongyang's nuclear-armed state status, Kim had succeeded in advancing toward his goal of international acceptance of North Korea as a sovereign nuclear-armed state that could launch missiles when it wanted, conduct nuclear tests when needed, and still be open to friendly relations with those countries willing to accept this new reality. The one remaining question circa 2020, however, was what type of diplomacy Kim would pursue once COVID-related restrictions were lifted. As such, Kim and his foreign-policy team considered possibilities for diplomacy without the denuclearization issue being anywhere near the table.

Russia's Desperation Meets DPRK Opportunism

It will always remain a legitimate counterfactual question whether Vladimir Putin and Kim Jong-un would have found comfort in each other's arms at this point in history if not for Russia's urgent need for munitions on the Ukrainian battlefield. It is unlikely that a shared hatred of the United States and the liberal rules-based order would have resulted in more than rhetorical affirmations of ideological solidarity and support, with Kim and Putin urging the other to fight the good fight. Russia would continue to pay lip service to the need for denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula and, consistent with Chinese talking points, point the finger at the United States for the current deadlock in negotiations while knowing it is North Korea who is refusing to return to the negotiating table. Just as Putin would likely not have been inclined to chase after Kim, it is questionable whether Russia would have been Kim's first major diplomatic pursuit following the loosening of COVID-related restrictions. Other than preserving a certain level of decency in the relationship to maintain Russia as a safe haven for North Korea's weapons procurement specialists, money launderers, and illegal workers, there is little Russia could offer to Kim at a cost Moscow would consider and in which he would be interested.¹⁷ The types of Russian assistance now being discussed in terms of military assistance and arms had not previously been on the table.

Yet, here we are with a war underway in Ukraine, a desperate need for munitions by Russia, and a willingness on Kim's part to go public with the relationship even while denying the munitions support.¹⁸ Initially, the clandestine nature of the deal, the denial from both Moscow and Pyongyang, and the limited scale of the support could be dismissed as a combination of one-off desperation and opportunism.¹⁹ The fact that North Korean support now includes short-range ballistic missiles and that Russian offers to North Korea could potentially include materials and technology necessary for both its weapon of mass destruction (WMD) and conventional programs is exponentially more troubling.²⁰ Recent developments in bilateral ties project an appearance of sustainability and, thus, strategic importance going forward.

Russia's Relaxation on Denuclearization

The first significant strategic action was the attendance of Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu at the North Korean military parade held on July 27, 2023, marking the 1953 Armistice Agreement or, as North Korea defines it, "Victory in the Great Fatherland Liberation War."²¹ Although far short of Russian recognition of North Korea as a nuclear power, the fact that Shoigu stood next to Kim Jong-un as North Korea's latest ICBMs passed the stage and that this took place a day after Kim had shown these ICBMs to Shoigu during a visit to an arms exhibition displayed Russia's comfort level in being seen as a close ally of a nuclear North Korea.²²

What Russia Seeks

With Shoigu's visit, both Moscow and Pyongyang appeared willing to move cooperation beyond illicit arms transactions and occasional rhetorical expressions of support. It is possible Putin perceived multiple advantages for putting Russia-North Korea cooperation on the international stage. Putin likely calculated this would goad US officials and be seen as a failure of US efforts to isolate Putin for his transgressions in Ukraine. Public proclamations of assistance to North Korea likely also had Seoul as an intended audience, demonstrating to South Korea that there would be a price to pay for supporting Ukraine.

It seems premature to conclude, however, that Putin's motivation in advancing the relationship with North Korea was to support a more grandiose strategy of establishing an alternative bloc system consisting of like-minded countries eager to develop a viable alternative to the US-led liberal order. Given Russia's traditional view of North Korea, Putin likely sees limited strategic value in Kim Jong-un as a viable partner in advancing Russian interests. It is also unlikely that Putin envisions a longer-term opportunity to expand and integrate North Korea's munitions production capabilities to essentially sub-contract Russia's munition requirements down the road.

What Pyongyang Seeks, For Now

North Korea's motivations have significant, if perhaps only temporary, overlap with those of Russia. Kim needed a diplomatic victory following his dismal engagements in 2018 and 2019. To both internal and external audiences, Kim can message advances in the North Korea-Russia relationship as validating the basic tenets of North Korean diplomacy outlined in the Fifth Party Plenum of the Seventh Party Congress: North Korea will find "breakthroughs" despite sanctions and pressure, relying on its own efforts and in cooperation with other countries who respect North Korea's choices, policies, and sovereignty.²³ The same message is directed toward the United States and South Korea and is succeeding to a limited effect, as calls are being made within the United States to abandon pressure and sanctions within the broader goal of complete and verifiable denuclearization and move toward an engagement policy built upon recognizing North Korea as a nuclear power.²⁴ Such signs likely encourage Kim to believe this approach will work over the longer term. The fact that some have gone so far as to blame the Yoon and Biden administrations for policy negligence that pushed Kim into Putin's arms likely also encourages Kim.²⁵

China's Current Inward Focus

China has been nervously quiet about recent developments in the North Korea-Russia relationship. This may speak to unspoken but real Chinese concerns over the potentially destabilizing elements of enhanced North Korea-Russia strategic cooperation. It may be that China finds itself back-footed, having expected to have been the first country with whom Kim sought to engage as pandemic restrictions were lifted. There have been a number of lower-level exchanges with China, but Kim's focus has so far been on Russia, and this alone is likely generating curiosity, angst, and even jealousy in China about the true nature of North Korea-Russia cooperation and potential security implications for Northeast Asia.²⁶

Three Futures: Responsibly Restrained, Reencouraged Rogue, Ready for Revisionism

The above review of North Korea's interactions with China and Russia reveals very little in terms of past deliberate and designed trilateralism. Shared or overlapping interests have been limited so far. The whole of any potential trilateral configuration is likely seen by all three parties as less than the sum of its parts – the parts being existing bilateral relationships. In regards to China, North Korea, and Russia, we have three authoritarian systems with personalistic tendencies that are protective of their sovereignty and autonomy and

comfortable working in traditional bilateral structures. Skepticism, therefore, over enduring trilateralism among the three is warranted; negligence of the threat of collaboration and cooperation among these three rogue actors, however, must be avoided.

So What Should We Be Most Worried About?

The most immediately discernible impact of Moscow's warming to Pyongyang is the weakening of targeted sanctions to slow the growth of Pyongyang's WMD program and bring Kim back to the negotiating table. Russia is throwing a lifeline to North Korea that will enable it to more confidently endure sanctions and pressure. This was, to be fair, a trend already underway as hundreds of North Korea missile launches since 2019 have gone unpunished in the UNSC due to Chinese and Russian opposition.²⁷

The more urgent question is how evolving relations between Pyongyang, Beijing, and Moscow might harm the current balance of power on the Korean Peninsula, threatening the tenuous but enduring peace that the peninsula has enjoyed for the past seventy years. For instance, what are the implications of Russia's technical and material assistance to North Korea's conventional and WMD capabilities? Would such trends encourage Kim Jong-un to believe that the use of force might otherwise be justified in this New Cold War structure?

Scenarios for North Korean Use of Force

A useful framework for examining how deteriorating trends in the behavior and rhetoric of China, North Korea, and Russia might lead to a crisis on the Korean Peninsula can be found in a recent National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) by the Office of Director of National Intelligence that projected various scenarios for North Korea's possible use of its growing nuclear arsenal.²⁸ The estimate, in which key judgments were declassified in June 2023, posited three potential scenarios for how Pyongyang could perceive the value and purpose of a growing nuclear arsenal through 2030: a solely defensive purpose, a coercive purpose to intimidate and blackmail while not challenging the status quo on the peninsula, and a revisionist purpose designed to use force on a larger scale to fundamentally change the status quo on the peninsula to Pyongyang's advantage.²⁹

North Korea's relationships with both China and Russia were important drivers in all three scenarios. Analysts within the US Intelligence Community (IC) assessed Kim would be more aggressive and adventurist if he felt he had the backing or tolerance of Beijing and Moscow. Pyongyang would continue or

expand its coercive use of military force, backed by nuclear weapons, if he felt diplomatic blowback was manageable and that China and Russia would continue to provide “lifelines” to ensure North Korea’s survival.³⁰

Despite the overlap that these three scenarios have, the framework provides a useful tool to assess future threats posed by a steadily growing North Korean nuclear program. Are we likely to see a benign and responsible nuclear North Korea that would only use nuclear weapons in self-defense? Will we have a coercive nuclear North Korea that will pose the same deterrent challenge it has for the past seven decades, relying on one-off provocations of limited objectives and generally de-escalatable? Or are we dealing with a nuclear North Korea that is going to seek a return on investment by using its nuclear weapons to pursue a broader change in the geopolitical balance of power on the Korean Peninsula through the use of force, including the possible use of nuclear weapons? This framework may also provide a useful tool to prognosticate future possibilities for trilateralism in the coming years.³¹

Scenario One: China and Russia Responsibly Restraining North Korea

The best-case scenario is that trilateralism evolves in a manner in which both Beijing and Moscow see value in using the trilateral construct to develop and use leverage to restrain Pyongyang and discourage dangerous and destabilizing behaviors. This assumes that Beijing and Moscow value stability and predictability in Northeast Asia more than they prioritize using issues related to the Korean Peninsula to distract, aggravate, and even weaken the United States in the region and globally. For its part, Pyongyang would need to demonstrate a willingness to exercise restraint for the common good, with confidence that such good behavior would yield tangible benefits. This would require a shift away from Pyongyang’s preferred approach of unilateralism, which utilizes coercion and intimidation as tools to compel Seoul to the table from a position of strength.³²

It is difficult to imagine such a scenario for several reasons. First and foremost is the value Pyongyang places on autonomy, sovereignty, and self-reliance. North Korea inherently distrusts the outside world, builds a domestic and external policy framework inoculating its system from outside pressure, and is most comfortable when its diplomatic interactions with the outside world minimize any leverage that could be used by a counterpart to shape or restrain North Korea. Kim will seek to keep as many options open as possible, finding that sustained normalized behavior takes North Korea off everyone’s radar.³³

Scenario Two: Beijing and Moscow Encouraged Pyongyang's Coercion

A second outcome, which was termed “coercive” by the NIE, was deemed by IC analysts as the “most likely” scenario, one in which nuclear weapons are used as a backstop for coercive behavior (including kinetic/lethal provocations) that have been a tool of North Korea’s diplomacy over the decades.³⁴ In such a case, China and Russia in a trilateral construct might:

- 1. model and justify** aggressive force that North Korea may emulate;
- 2. assist and strengthen** North Korea’s WMD or conventional forces;
- 3. direct or embolden** military action by North Korea.

North Korea-Russia cooperation, marked by defiance, aggressiveness, and the legitimization of the use of force to achieve strategic goals, could lead to a North Korea that is much stronger and more emboldened to misbehave. Such behavior would be underscored by North Korean confidence in both the success of its coercive actions and the support from Moscow (and even Beijing) to mitigate blowback. Kim Jong-un may perceive US concerns about nuclear escalation as being sufficient to move the United States to deter or discourage ROK responses to increasingly provocative DPRK actions.³⁵

Russia and an Already Underway Dangerous Disruption of the Peninsula:

These and similar concerns have driven worries about the nature of North Korea-Russia cooperation over the past year. US National Security Council Coordinator for Strategic Communications John Kirby noted on January 4, 2024, “In return for its support, we assess that Pyongyang is seeking military assistance from Russia, including fighter aircraft, surface-to-air missiles, armored vehicles, ballistic missile production equipment or materials, and other advanced technologies.”³⁶ The concern is two-fold: Russia is providing critical missile and nuclear technologies to help North Korea advance its WMD program, and Russia’s transferring of technologies and materials could advance the reliability and lethality of key North Korean conventional systems. Most viable coercive options consist of actions in the conventional or gray zone (i.e., cyber) backstopped by nuclear threats: the likelihood of such coercive action increases as Kim’s confidence in each category of his military capabilities grows.

China’s Concern About Its Backyard

How China responds to this is an interesting yet unanswered question; in some ways, it may be the test of trilateral cooperation. For Putin, there is little risk in

meeting with Kim Jong-un, making ideological proclamations about fraternal commitments to the anti-US and anti-imperialist struggle, allowing shipments of new technologies and capabilities to North Korea, and even offering broad if somewhat vague encouragement that Russia would have North Korea's back should troubles escalate with the United States. The same, of course, is not true for Xi Jinping. Russia has a much lower price to pay than China in the event of a sudden and uncontrollable escalation of tensions on the Korean Peninsula. Putin could even reap the benefits of conflict on the peninsula and the resulting drain of US and South Korean resources without a serious risk of instability or harm to Russia's core national interests. Again, that is not the case with China, which suggests that differing views on North Korea could serve as an irritant in the PRC-Russia relationship.

Scenario Three: Sum of All Fears...Revisionism?

The most dangerous outcome of North Korea-China-Russia trilateralism would be one in which North Korea perceives the overall international environment as conducive to using its acquired capabilities and at high diplomatic and economic costs to achieve long-standing strategic objectives on the Korean Peninsula. Kim may feel he can take military action to subjugate South Korea, as he recently threatened, believing the United States may be less than willing to risk wider war with either or both China and Russia to defend its South Korean ally.³⁷ The various permutations of such actions are too numerous to explore, but it is useful to posit some high-impact Taiwan-related scenarios.³⁸

1. China commences an invasion of Taiwan and directs North Korea to take actions against South Korea that would tie down US forces, prevent the United States from using its bases and forces in South Korea, and possibly cause Japan to limit its cooperation with the United States. Both Beijing and Moscow support Pyongyang rhetorically and materially. North Korea grabs some South Korean territory, seeking to compel capitulation by Seoul with the threat of nuclear use.
2. China commences an invasion of Taiwan and directs North Korea to refrain from action to ensure Beijing can control escalation. Pyongyang determines, following the conclusion of the Taiwan conflict, that the United States is weakened and will be unable or unwilling to robustly support South Korea if certain redlines (i.e., nuclear use, large-scale casualties, etc.) are not crossed. Pyongyang compels Seoul to negotiate for peace, while Beijing urges Washington to bring Seoul to the table to accept the new facts on the ground and acknowledge Pyongyang's new position of strength.

3. China's actions toward Taiwan are limited in scope but advance its goal of strengthening China's position, particularly in Asia. Both Beijing and Moscow are reluctant to support specific revisionist actions warned by Pyongyang in its rhetoric to "subjugate" Seoul, but they are far more committed to active military cooperation, joint training and exercises, trilateral shows of force, and even cooperation in the nuclear and missile domains. An arms race ensues in Northeast Asia, and talks in South Korea and Japan to secure their own nuclear deterrent advance.

These are just a handful of potential scenarios resulting from troubling trilateralism between China, North Korea, and Russia. Pyongyang would find itself in a club of nation-states rejecting the legitimacy of the so-called Western liberal international order while justifying the use of force toward revisionist ends to correct perceived historical injustices. That said, we have not heard proclamations from Beijing or Moscow urging all aggrieved victims of the unjust US-led imperialist world order arise, go forth, and resolve your grievances. For now, Beijing and Moscow may feel justified in challenging the existing global order for their own specific national interests, but they fall short of demonstrating a desire for a complete challenge to the existing order that would result in global chaos. The key for the United States will be to encourage such a posture without rewarding or incentivizing bad behavior in a way that guarantees a return to concession-earning coercion.

Conclusion and Recommendations:

There are ample reasons to conclude that the more troubling aspects of trilateralism among North Korea, China, and Russia will be mitigated by diverse interests, mutual distrust, and concerns that any one partner's actions could lead to unwanted entanglement.³⁹ This has not motivated Beijing to influence Moscow's actions in Ukraine, and it is very unlikely Xi Jinping's Taiwan calculus factors into what Vladimir Putin thinks. It is possible that the same drivers that limited deeper cooperation between North Korea and its two neighbors during and after the Cold War – Pyongyang's protection of its autonomy and Beijing and Moscow's low priority on relations with Pyongyang – will mitigate the risks posed by cooperation among these three actors.

That said, recent geopolitical developments, particularly the growing strategic relationship between Pyongyang and Moscow, cannot but cause concern about the trajectory of the North Korean nuclear threat and the possibility of conflict on the Korean Peninsula in this dangerously transforming geopolitical environment. The growth of North Korea's nuclear and missile arsenals makes

such a threat more credible; the strengthening of its conventional force enables and emboldens Pyongyang even further. Russian aid to North Korea is a top priority of concern for policymakers and defense planners in Washington, Seoul, and elsewhere.

Deterrence of this threat requires multiple reinforcing efforts. Extended and conventional deterrence remains crucial, as has been the case over the past seventy years of armistice. Multilateral diplomacy and security cooperation among both like-minded and non-like-minded states reinforce the US and ROK deterrent capabilities. Relentless approaches to China and Russia – regardless of their receptivity – must emphasize that constraining, not enabling and emboldening, North Korea is in their best interests, not just ours. Beijing and Moscow may be inclined to ignore such concerns, accuse us of exaggerating the threat, and hope for the best. The job of the United States, South Korea, Japan, and like-minded states is to convince and remind Beijing and Moscow that they will be unable to avoid incurring high costs for North Korea's coercive and revisionist behavior. Such an approach may be the best, if not the only way, to shape troublesome trilateralism in Northeast Asia going forward.

Endnotes

- ¹ Multiple histories have covered strains between North Korea and Russia during the early years of North Korean history. See Sydney Seiler, *Kim Il-sŏng 1941-1948: The Creation of a Legend, the Building of a Regime* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1994); Dae-sook Suh, *Kim Il Sung: The North Korean Leader* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988); and Joungwon Alexander Kim, *Divided Korea: The Politics of Development, 1945-1972* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975).
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