

Allying Against Adversaries: U.S.-South Korea Cooperation amid Heightened North Korea-Russia Ties

By Edward Howell

The signing of the “Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Treaty” between North Korea and Russia on June 19, 2024, catalyzed a process of escalating cooperation between the two states both within and beyond the security domain. Since then, North Korea-Russia ties have hardened and surpassed their origins as a cash-for-munitions relationship following Russia’s initial invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022. Not only has North Korea evinced its commitment to the relationship by deploying at least 15,000 troops—initially to the Kursk region—to aid Russia’s war against Ukraine, but, as of 2025, both North Korea and Russia refer to the relationship as an “alliance,” a term which Russia was previously reluctant to use.¹ Whereas prior to 2025, Russian officials described Moscow’s relationship with Pyongyang as a “partnership”—perhaps to allow it to reduce its commitments should Moscow seek to do so—this year has witnessed senior Russian officials, including Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, Secretary of the Security Council Sergei Shoigu, and Russian Ambassador to North Korea Alexandr Matsegora refer to Moscow-Pyongyang ties as an “alliance.”²

As Sydney Seiler rightly posits, the increasingly strategic nature of cooperation between North Korea and Russia cannot be ignored.³ As such, it raises two concerning possibilities: firstly, in line with the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Treaty, the likelihood of close relations continuing following any conclusion to the war in Ukraine is high, even if the nature of these ties will inevitably change. Secondly, and relatedly, the two states’ cooperation beyond the security domain—such as in economic, cultural, agricultural, and tourism sectors—makes clear how, while not equivalent to the exchange of North Korean artillery, missiles, and manpower for financial and technological assistance, both states seek to benefit from such multi-domain cooperation.

These challenges show how for the United States and South Korea, the problem of North Korea is limited neither to the country’s continued vertical proliferation of nuclear weapons and delivery systems nor its ongoing human rights violations. Escalating North Korea-Russia cooperation has further complicated the challenges of dealing with the North Korean threat on the part of the United States and its allies, particularly given the likelihood that North Korea has been—and still is—receiving and utilizing military and missile technology from Russia to advance its own capabilities.⁴ This cooperation has considerably emboldened the Kim Jong Un

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regime, such that even if the Donald Trump and Lee Jae Myung administrations in Washington and Seoul seek to engage in dialogue with Pyongyang, the likelihood that Kim comes to the negotiating table in the short term seems low.

Since his inauguration on June 3, 2025, South Korean President Lee Jae Myung has stressed the importance of strengthening the U.S.-South Korea alliance to deter North Korean provocations while remaining open to dialogue with the North. Lee's recent meetings with U.S. President Donald Trump and Chinese President Xi Jinping on the sidelines of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in Gyeongju, held from October 31 to November 1, 2025, have highlighted how Seoul has sought Beijing and Washington's assistance in attempting to bring Pyongyang back to the negotiating table.⁵ However, while Kim Jong Un and Kim Yo Jong have made fleeting references to the possibility of reviving talks with Trump, the Kim regime has simultaneously repeated its post-Hanoi summit mantra that North Korea would return to talks only if the United States abandoned its "denuclearization obsession."⁶ North Korea's denuclearization is more unlikely than ever before; the U.S. bombings of three Iranian nuclear facilities on June 21, 2025, only reinforced Pyongyang's decision to maintain and strengthen its nuclear capabilities. In the face of North Korea's unwillingness to denuclearize and the challenges posed by escalating North Korea-Russia cooperation, the United States and South Korea must continue to deter the multifarious threats emanating from North Korea through continued defensive military exercises and robust enforcement and monitoring of existing sanctions. Despite the Trump administration's transactional approach to alliances, the United States and South Korea must demonstrate the strategic importance of their blood-forged relationship, which South Korea has attempted to highlight through the recent summitry between Trump and Lee.

South Korea also must not be afraid of strengthening the initiatives put forth during the previous Yoon Suk Yeol administration, such as the Washington Declaration, at a time of escalating cross-regional threats. Most fundamentally, a successful U.S.-South Korea alliance involves clarity of expectations on both sides. Amid these intertwined regional threats, South Korea must prepare to increase its own financial spending for U.S. extended deterrence. At the same time, the Trump administration should recognize the strategic value of the Korean Peninsula, most pertinently that security threats on the Korean Peninsula affect not just the interests of U.S. allies in Northeast Asia but, crucially, those of the United States.

Moscow and Pyongyang: Multi-Sector Brothers in Arms

Russia's war in Ukraine has now surpassed its three-year anniversary. Following the first year of the war, cooperation between North Korea and Russia notably grew beyond its origins as a cash-for-artillery exchange. The relationship reached new heights after the signing of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Treaty on June 19, 2024. Although many commentators have placed greatest attention on the treaty's mutual defense clause (Article four), wherein either party agrees to provide "immediate military and other assistance" if one of the two states are attacked, other aspects of the treaty must not be ignored. Articles nine and ten highlight

how inter-state cooperation would not be limited to the security realm but would expand to confronting “challenges” in information technology, food and energy security, supply chain strains, and healthcare; or strengthening economic cooperation, exchanges, and joint research in space, biology, peaceful nuclear energy, and artificial intelligence.⁷

This year was the first to bring explicit evidence of such expanded cooperation as mentioned in the treaty. For instance, from June 29 to July 1, the Russia’s Minister of Culture Olga Lyubimova visited Pyongyang with a 125-strong delegation of performers and praised the “invincibility of the DPRK-Russia friendship.”⁸ In another example, on July 15, a delegation from Russia’s Emergencies Ministry visited North Korea to assist in North Korea’s preparations for the summer rainy season and discuss areas for cooperation in science and technology.⁹ It was hardly surprising, then, when reports emerged from North Korean state media outlets in late July that North Korean exchange students and researchers were being sent to Russia to develop and use artificial intelligence technologies.¹⁰

Of concern for the United States and South Korea, such expanded cooperation and ambitions for further cooperation have highlighted how the affirmations by North Korea and Russia of their “unconditional readiness” to comply with the treaty’s provisions and formalize relations “to a significantly new allied level” have gone beyond mere rhetoric.¹¹ For instance, on February 8, 2025, Kim affirmed that the North Korean people and army “will invariably support and encourage the just cause of the Russian army and people to defend their sovereignty,” a view which, only days later, Russian Ambassador Matsegora corroborated in praising the treatment of wounded Russian soldiers in North Korean hospitals as a demonstration of the “mutually beneficial,” “equal,” and “long term” nature of the North Korea-Russia “alliance.”¹² The first public admission in April 2025, by both sides, of the involvement of North Koreans in fighting for Russia against Ukraine has reinforced how the two states intend to continue strengthening their security cooperation at least for the duration of the war in Ukraine. In August, North Korea admitted the deaths of over one hundred troops who, as Kim mentioned, had “defended, through storm and shellfire, the trust of the Party and fatherland in our army,” with many still “carrying out their honorable combat mission.”¹³

The mounting quantity and nature of high-level exchanges between North Korea and Russia this year provide further evidence for the longer-term nature of North Korea-Russia cooperation. Of note, Secretary Shoigu has visited North Korea three times this year—and a total of five times since his first visit on July 25, 2023—for meetings with Kim. Minister Lavrov has also engaged in several “strategic dialogues” with Kim and his North Korean counterpart, Choe Son Hui. In just one example, a visit by Lavrov to Pyongyang from July 11 to July 13 this year saw both Lavrov and Kim agree to “strengthen the strategic and tactical cooperation and intensify concerted action” between their states.¹⁴ As the war in Ukraine continues, the prospect of North Korea sending more troops—even if not from the Reconnaissance General Bureau and “Storm Corps” special forces whence initial deployments of troops came—remains likely.¹⁵ The increasingly frequent affirmations from North Korean officials and Kim himself of North Korea’s

“unconditional support” for “all measures” taken by Russia in the war have only increased the likelihood of cooperation outlasting the war’s end.¹⁶

What makes this renewed security cooperation particularly concerning for the U.S.-South Korea alliance is the extent to which North Korea has become emboldened to a point hitherto unseen. The pledges of unwavering mutual support between North Korea and Russia—whether in terms of Russian support for opposing international sanctions against North Korea or provision of missile and military technology to North Korea—mean that the two states will continue to undermine international regimes, whether with respect to nuclear non-proliferation or sanctions. Moreover, given Russia’s provision of assistance to North Korea, the likelihood of North Korea returning to talks with the United States and South Korea, while not negligible, has declined. As a former South Korean official put it to the author: “as for any meeting between Kim and Trump, Kim may say no: he has Russia now.”¹⁷

In response to the deepening North Korea-Russia relationship, the United States and South Korea must prepare for North Korea’s continued receipt of missile and military technology assistance from Russia to strengthen the scope and sophistication of its own nuclear technology, even following any end to the war in Ukraine. In just one example, on December 30, 2024, North Korea unveiled its first guided-missile destroyer-class warship, *Choe Hyon*; it was the first such North Korean naval vessel to carry nuclear-armed strategic cruise and short-range tactical ballistic missiles and feature “anti-air, anti-ship, anti-submarine missile capability but also weapon systems for the most effective ground striking operations.”¹⁸ Despite the infamous failed launch of the second such warship, the *Kang Kon*, on May 21, 2025, there is a possibility that Russia provided assistance in the design and construction of these warships.¹⁹ Not only is the layout of the *Choe Hyon*’s phased array radar system akin to that found on Russian Karakurt-class warships, but the integrated air defense system installed on the vessel notably resembles Russia’s Pantsir missile systems. As the Multilateral Sanctions Monitoring Team’s (MSMT) first report made clear in June this year, Russia has transferred at least one Pantsir-class combat vehicle to North Korea and supported the development of North Korean air defense systems.²⁰

U.S.-South Korea Relations under Trump 2.0

After taking office on January 20, 2025, the Trump administration’s first two-hundred days in office revolved around the imposition of tariffs on friend and foe alike, as announced on April 2, so-called “Liberation Day.” Despite an initial imposition of 26 percent tariffs on all South Korean imports, subsequent U.S.-South Korea negotiations led to the United States adjusting the reciprocal tariff rate to 15 percent on July 30.²¹ As part of the preliminary accord, South Korea agreed to provide USD 350 billion to the United States for investment projects selected by Trump, as well as purchase energy products worth USD 100 billion. A meeting between Trump and Lee in Seoul on October 29 saw both countries announce that they had reached a finalized deal, with South Korea agreeing to invest USD 200 billion in cash, over multiple years, together with USD 150 billion in shipbuilding investments.²² These negotiations have occurred amid ongoing calls by Trump that South Korea must pay more for its own defense and for U.S.

extended deterrence. In 2017, at the start of the first Trump administration (Trump 1.0), Seoul's contribution for the stationing of U.S. forces in South Korea—as part of the Special Measures Agreement (SMA)—amounted to approximately USD 817 million.²³ In 2025, with the second Trump administration (Trump 2.0) in power, South Korea's SMA contribution rose to KRW 1.4 trillion, with the two countries having agreed in 2024 that Seoul will pay KRW 1.52 trillion (USD 1.14 billion) in 2026.²⁴ These increases in South Korea's SMA contribution were agreed upon in October 2024, during the final few months of the Joe Biden administration. Trump, then running for the U.S. presidency, predictably criticized South Korea's increased contribution as insufficient, and highlighted how South Korea ought to be “paying us \$10 billion a year.”²⁵

Although the Trump administration is yet to define its policy toward the Korean Peninsula, the administration has emphasized its prioritization of deterring China over North Korea. Even prior to his nomination as U.S. Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, Elbridge Colby stressed how “North Korea is not a primary threat to the U.S.” and that “U.S. forces on the peninsula in my view should not be held hostage to dealing with the North Korean problem.”²⁶ On August 13, President Lee outlined several key foreign policy objectives for his five-year term, including improving inter-Korean relations while achieving denuclearization and sustainable peace on the Peninsula; strengthening the U.S.-South Korea alliance; but also aiming to retake wartime operational control (OPCON) of the South Korean military from the United States.²⁷

The alignment between the United States and South Korea with respect to the Korean Peninsula and China remains a key issue of contention moving forward. Prior to his election, Lee indicated his opposition to the additional deployment of missiles for the U.S.-deployed Terminal High Altitude Aerial Defense (THAAD) system in Seoul, a view shared by Beijing given Beijing's antagonism toward the THAAD presence on the Korean Peninsula.²⁸ Last year, Lee criticized then President Yoon's attempts to strengthen ties with Japan and Taiwan, asking why South Korea should “care what happens to the Taiwan Strait.”²⁹ Since his election, however, Lee has adopted a more careful approach in articulating South Korea's policies toward China and the United States, stressing the need for simultaneously pursuing cooperative ties with China while deepening the U.S.-South Korea alliance.³⁰ This restraint is warranted with respect to South Korea's approach to China. The Lee administration would be wise to pursue an approach of continuity with the previous administration, not least by prioritizing trilateral coordination between the United States, South Korea, and Japan and managing the risks posed by China.

Nevertheless, the prospect of conflict between U.S. and South Korean China policy remains. Firstly, if Lee does decide to follow through on his pre-election statements, then Seoul's “tilt” to Beijing will stand at odds with the Trump administration's primary foreign policy focus on deterring Beijing. Secondly, the Trump administration's focus on “strategic flexibility,” wherein the primary role of U.S. forces in South Korea is not to deter the local threat of North Korea but to fulfill a broader regional purpose in deterring China—such as in a Taiwan contingency—may conflict with Lee's aforementioned remarks highlighting his desire for South Korea to play less of a role in the wider East Asian region.

The first summit between Trump and Lee on August 25, 2025, demonstrated how, at least in rhetoric, Lee has, for now, moderated his previous criticisms of the U.S.-South Korea alliance and sought to balance his commitments to dialogue and deterrence vis-à-vis North Korea. Such an approach has allowed Lee to develop positive early relations with his U.S. counterpart, not least given Trump's penchant for reviving U.S.-North Korea talks. Predictably, both Trump and Lee agreed on the importance of fostering dialogue with North Korea, with Lee praising Trump as "the only person that can make progress on this [the North Korean] issue."³¹ The first Trump-Lee meeting demonstrated the mutual interest on the part of both leaders in strengthening diplomacy with North Korea. Trump even complimented Lee on being "much more prone" toward improving inter-Korean relations compared to past South Korean presidents. Within this context, therefore, on August 29, the South Korean Ministry of Unification requested over KRW 1 trillion (USD 721.8 million) for the 2026 budget to fund inter-Korean economic projects and exchanges. If approved by the National Assembly, it will mark the first time in over three years that the fund has exceeded KRW 1 trillion.³² At the same time, the Lee government rightly pledged an 8.2 percent increase in annual defense spending to KRW 66.3 trillion (USD 48 billion) for 2026, the fastest annual growth in defense spending since 2008.³³ On October 1, Lee emphasized that "to ensure peace and prosperity for the Republic of Korea, we must not depend on anyone else but strengthen our own power."³⁴ Yet South Korea's defense budget increase should not come at the expense of a reduction in the strength of the U.S.-South Korea alliance. Many questions remain as to how the Lee government will balance deterring the increasingly multifaceted North Korea threat with its ambitions to revive inter-Korean economic cooperation.

Thus, the inaugural Trump-Lee bilateral meeting was a positive step for both countries, in affirming the possibility of cooperation between Washington and Seoul during a time of heightened regional security threats. Stronger cooperation is necessary given the fundamental change in the geopolitical landscape of the Korean Peninsula, inter-Korean relations, and the security of the East Asian region. One of the most significant changes between Trump 1.0 and Trump 2.0 pertains to North Korea's approach to dialogue with the United States and South Korea. During the Biden administration, Pyongyang both strengthened its nuclear and missile capabilities and demonstrated little interest in engaging in talks with Washington and Seoul. North Korea's escalating cooperation with Russia owing to the Ukraine War has contributed to this lack of interest, despite attempts by President Trump to revive dialogue. Although President Trump praised his "great relationship" with Kim on March 31, 2025, and noted how "there [wa]s communication" between the two leaders, Kim seemed to take a different view.³⁵ In June, reports that North Korean diplomats in New York refused to accept a letter from Trump to Kim, which sought to revive talks, epitomized the change in U.S.-North Korea dynamics between the two Trump administrations.³⁶ Given what Kim has repeatedly termed "the invincible DPRK-Russia friendship," even if any U.S.-North Korea talks do take place, the likelihood of North Korea offering substantial concessions is far lower than during Trump 1.0.³⁷ That said, recent statements by the Kim regime have shown how, despite its lack of appetite for inter-Korean dialogue, it does not want to close the door to talks with the United States completely. For

example, in July 2025, Kim Yo Jong stressed how personal relations between Kim Jong Un and Trump were “not bad”; in September, Kim spoke of his “good memory of the current US President Trump.”³⁸

With North Korea’s cooperation with Russia adding another dimension to the North Korea problem—beyond its vertical nuclear proliferation and human rights abuses—the need for the United States and South Korea to maintain focus on the complete, verifiable, and irreversible denuclearization of North Korea is more urgent than ever before. Nevertheless, unlike Trump 1.0, both Trump and Kim have now already met three times in two years, in 2018 and 2019. Any subsequent dialogue between the two leaders will, therefore, not be new. Whereas in the first Trump administration, South Korea played a pivotal role in facilitating and initiating dialogue between the United States and North Korea, South Korea now runs the risk of being marginalized in the facilitation and content of talks should any Trump-Kim summit materialize in the second Trump administration.

Despite North Korea’s lack of intention to denuclearize, the simultaneous circumstances of the second Trump administration in Washington and the progressive Lee administration in Seoul may offer some areas of cooperation surrounding diplomatic outreach to North Korea, as demonstrated by the first Trump-Lee bilateral meeting. Nevertheless, any such cooperation must bear in mind North Korea’s strategy of seeking to exploit the U.S.-South Korea alliance for its own benefits. Firstly, the United States and South Korea must continue to affirm their commitment to North Korea’s denuclearization, a commitment which, surprisingly, evaded mention during the two meetings between Trump and Lee in August and October, respectively. Pyongyang’s refusal to denuclearize does not mean that denuclearization should be dropped as a policy goal, and Washington and Seoul must be wary of Pyongyang taking advantage of any perceived reduction in the U.S. commitment to denuclearization.

While Trump’s desire to meet Kim by the end of the year aligns with Lee’s calls to “restore trust and revive dialogue” with North Korea, the two leaders must avoid striking a hasty deal with the Kim regime for the sake of doing so.³⁹ In this vein, it is important to recognize that Lee’s inter-Korean policy also targets domestic audiences, serving as a point of differentiation from the policies of his conservative predecessor. Given North Korea’s history of exploiting talks with South Korea and the United States to garner legitimacy, Trump and Lee must resist rewarding North Korea unconditionally. In light of Pyongyang’s strategy of seeking maximum concessions from states without offering its own concessions on its nuclear and missile program, it will treat any abandonment of denuclearization as a policy on the part of Washington and Seoul as tacit acceptance of its nuclear-armed status.⁴⁰

In his inaugural address to the United Nations on September 23, 2025, Lee outlined his “END” initiative, wherein through “Exchange,” “Normalization,” and “Denuclearization,” the world would witness a “new era of peaceful coexistence” between the two Koreas.⁴¹ The initiative consists of a phased approach toward denuclearization (commencing with a freeze in North Korea’s nuclear and missile development), preceded by inter-Korean cooperation and

exchange and leading to the normalization of relations between the two Koreas. The logic behind such an initiative is not new, as evidenced by the “Sunshine Policy” of the Kim Dae-jung administration in the early 2000s and President Moon Jae-in’s approach of engagement through dialogue. Yet for all its rhetorical popularity, Lee’s “END” initiative is unlikely to open the door to potential denuclearization or even arms control negotiations. Since Lee’s election, North Korea has repeated multiple times that irrespective of the government in South Korea, North Korea has “no interest” in talks with the “most hostile state” of the South, let alone talks involving denuclearization.⁴² Indeed, only days before Lee’s speech, Kim rejected Seoul’s phased approach, and stressed that denuclearization is the “last, last thing to expect from us.”⁴³

Secondly, the Lee government’s pledge to transfer wartime OPCON from Washington to Seoul before the end of Lee’s term in 2030 could offer another avenue of U.S.-South Korea cooperation. On November 3, the U.S. and South Korean joint chiefs of staff agreed to “continue efforts to meet the conditions required for achieving OPCON transition and strengthen the alliance’s combined defense posture.”⁴⁴ While OPCON transfer has long been on the agenda of South Korean progressives, it must be noted that South Korea has only once maintained full operational control of its forces, namely from June 1949 to June 25, 1950, prior to the outbreak of the Korean War.⁴⁵ Lee’s plans to transfer wartime OPCON to South Korea would sit in line with President Trump’s disdain for the presence of U.S. troops in South Korea. Across both the first and second Trump administrations, the U.S. president has repeatedly called on South Korea to seek greater autonomy in its security, whether by raising its contributions for the stationing of United States Forces Korea (USFK) in South Korea or by allowing the United States to broaden the role of USFK beyond the Korean Peninsula.⁴⁶

Transferring wartime OPCON from the United States to South Korea would reduce the overall U.S. defense commitment to South Korea and provide South Korea with greater responsibility for its own defense, thereby allowing the United States greater leverage to focus on deterring China. Nevertheless, even with all of Trump and Lee’s eagerness to complete the transfer of OPCON, they should choose to undertake any such maneuvers with severe caution. The political leadership must bear in mind the longer-term consequences of OPCON transfer on the U.S.-South Korea alliance. A hasty transfer would only strengthen calls to reduce or, *in extremis*, remove U.S. troops from South Korea, an action which would severely jeopardize the stability of the Korean Peninsula.

For all Trump’s rhetoric, the complete withdrawal of USFK remains unlikely. At the same time, however, observers should not discount the prospect of USFK troops being redeployed in the event of a Taiwan contingency—whether in the short or medium term. Crucially, any signals of a potential reduced U.S. commitment to South Korea risk exploitation by North Korea. As a former South Korean official put it with respect to the possible consequences of OPCON transfer and the redeployment of USFK: “North Korea would be happy.”⁴⁷ In any such event, North Korea would view the reduction of U.S. forces in South Korea as an opportunity to escalate provocations towards its southern counterpart, not least since the Kim regime ruled out the peaceful reunification of the Korean Peninsula under the North’s control as a policy objective

in January 2024. North Korea would leverage any Taiwan contingency as an opportunity to exploit the security vacuum present in South Korea and, in turn, take advantage of the U.S. inability to defend both Taiwan and South Korea.

Any future U.S.-South Korea summitry must seriously consider North Korea's heightened nuclear development, cooperation with Russia, and fundamental change in policy toward South Korea. Despite having abandoned the goal of the reunification of the Korean Peninsula, Kim made clear how, in the event of any war on the peninsula, the North would "occupy, subjugate, and reclaim" and "annex" South Korea.⁴⁸ At a time of growing threats to regional and global security, the United States and South Korea must avoid hastily pursuing OPCON transfer given the possible consequences on North Korea's behavior. Instead, the United States and South Korea must continue to strengthen the existing sanctions regime on North Korea and take active roles within the newly established MSMT, monitoring North Korea's sanctions violations and holding it to account. Moreover, U.S.-South Korea cooperation can further develop by continuing the measures implemented to strengthen bilateral security cooperation under the Yoon and Biden administrations. In particular, the Washington Declaration of April 2023 reassured South Korea that the "U.S.'s commitment to extend deterrence to the ROK is backed by the full range of U.S. capabilities," and committed both states to "deeper, cooperative decision-making on nuclear deterrence, including through enhanced dialogue and information sharing regarding growing nuclear threats to the ROK and the region."⁴⁹ In addition to bolstering this relationship, the allies should maintain the Nuclear Consultative Group (NCG), established in light of the Declaration, as an exemplar both of the U.S. extended deterrence commitment to South Korea and the interrelationship between assuring allies and deterring adversaries. By permitting greater South Korean participation in discussions on nuclear and strategic planning, nuclear consultation during crises, and U.S. decision-making, the NCG allows for a more robust consideration of Seoul's interests in the event of any contingency on the peninsula.⁵⁰

For now, the second Trump administration's precise policies toward North and South Korea remain unclear. With the ongoing North Korea-Russia cooperation likely to catalyze a stronger North Korean nuclear and missile program—considering the transfer of missile and military technology from Russia to North Korea—the United States and South Korea would be well-advised to continue implementing the avenues for cooperation outlined between former presidents Biden and Yoon. Even though Seoul and Washington pledged earlier in 2025 to continue the NCG under Trump 2.0, a much-speculated fifth meeting due to take place in July did not materialize.⁵¹ Continuing the NCG would not be at odds with the Trump administration's focus on deterring China, given the Washington Declaration's focus on threats from both the Korean Peninsula and wider East Asian region. Moreover, the possibility for U.S.-South Korea cooperation in the domain of civil nuclear energy presents another useful avenue of cooperation amid heightened North Korea-Russia ties. One of the most significant concessions South Korea gained from the Trump-Lee meeting in October 2025 was U.S. approval of South Korea's development of nuclear-powered submarines.⁵² Continued cooperation in shipbuilding, as witnessed in an agreement between Hyundai and Huntington Ingalls to build the U.S. Navy's Next Generation Logistics Ship, will also benefit both Washington and Seoul by strengthening

the U.S.-South Korea alliance in the face of common challenges.⁵³ Moving forward, Seoul must also not shy away from confronting the reality of having to increase its own financial contributions to the U.S.-South Korea alliance, albeit not to the levels demanded by Trump, at a time of growing local, regional, and global security threats. At the same time, doing so should not give the United States cause to abandon or weaken its existing alliance. While the United States and South Korea have reiterated the need for both sides to “modernize” their alliance, particularly in terms of defense cooperation, modernizing an alliance requires clear commitments from both sides.⁵⁴

The United States and South Korea must recognize that North Korea’s mounting cooperation with Russia is not limited to bilateral ties between the two states. Beyond North Korea and Russia’s partnership, the two states have also cooperated with China and Iran, particularly the former, as was recently seen in the meeting of Xi Jinping, Vladimir Putin, and Kim (among other leaders) in Beijing on September 3, 2025. The transfer of Shahed drones from Iran to Russia for use in the war in Ukraine—drones which Russia has subsequently learned to produce indigenously—and the trade in dual-use technologies between Russia and China offer two additional examples.⁵⁵ Moreover, China’s silence on the heightened North Korea-Russia cooperation, all the while continuing to assist North Korea in evading sanctions, emphasizes the strengthening albeit far-from-formalized ties between what some observers have termed the “CRINK.”⁵⁶ Within this backdrop, an additional challenge for the U.S.-South Korea alliance pertains to this cooperation—although uneven and asymmetric—between North Korea, Russia, China, and Iran, and these actors’ calculations toward the Korean Peninsula given their opposition to the United States, its alliances, and its leadership of the postwar international order.

Responding to the “CRINK”: North Korea-Russia Cooperation and Beyond

What makes the North Korea-Russia cooperation particularly challenging for the U.S.-South Korea alliance is that this renewed bilateral partnership has become embedded within a broader ideological alignment of states—including China and Iran—for whom the postwar liberal international order is anathema. On the one hand, China remains hesitant to endorse the mounting security cooperation between North Korea and Russia, particularly given China’s reluctance to become embroiled in any conflict on the Korean Peninsula despite having signed a mutual defense treaty with North Korea in 1961. On the other hand, China has continued to aid North Korea’s evasion of sanctions by enabling illicit ship-to-ship and port-to-port transfers of coal and refined petroleum; allowing sanctioned Russian ships facilitating weapons transfers from Russia to North Korea to moor at Chinese ports; and also trading in dual-use technologies and providing Russia with Chinese-made drone engines.⁵⁷ While the Trump administration has articulated its prioritization of deterring China as a foreign policy objective, the Lee administration has stressed how it seeks to ensure that South Korea’s ties with China follow “the path of mutual prosperity as strategic cooperative partners.”⁵⁸

In spite of the rhetoric from the Kim regime pertaining to the cordial ties between Trump and Kim during Trump 1.0, North Korea remains unwilling to come to the negotiating table both with

the United States and with South Korea in the short term. Nevertheless, Washington and Seoul must not neglect Pyongyang's blossoming ties with Moscow, Beijing, and to a lesser extent, Tehran. The recent military parades in Beijing and Pyongyang on September 3 and October 10, respectively—the former to commemorate the eightieth anniversary of victory over Japan in the World War II; the latter to mark the eightieth anniversary of the founding of the Workers' Party of Korea—highlight firstly, how North Korea, China, and Russia seek to signal greater solidarity against the West, and secondly, how North Korea seeks to make clear to the West that its ties with Russia will continue after the conclusion of the war in Ukraine. In the presence of senior Chinese and Russian officials, *inter alia*, Kim vowed to turn North Korea “into the best socialist paradise in the world” in the face of “growing nuclear war threats by the US imperialists.”⁵⁹

Addressing North Korea's cooperation with Russia is far from easy. As one former South Korean diplomat mentioned: “there is little South Korea can do” to alter Pyongyang's alliance with Moscow.⁶⁰ Yet addressing the threat from Russia offers one possible area of cooperation between the United States and South Korea at a time when North Korea will be paying attention to President Trump's oscillating relationship with Putin. For instance, in March 2025, three days before Shoigu made his first visit to North Korea of the year, a telephone call between Trump and Putin saw the former agree to Trump's proposal for a thirty-day ceasefire between Russia and Ukraine on energy targets (which both sides would subsequently accuse the other of violating).⁶¹ Given the then-possibility, though remote, of U.S.-Russian ties thawing, it was unsurprising that Kim reaffirmed to Shoigu North Korea's “resolute will” to “support Russia in the struggle for defending its national sovereignty, territorial integrity and security interests in the future.”⁶² Kim would have been cognizant of any Russian abandonment had U.S.-Russia ties warmed.

The continued volatility in relations between Trump and Putin renders a thawing in U.S.-Russia ties increasingly elusive, all the while North Korea continues to exploit the war in Ukraine to receive financial and technological assistance from Russia. As such, Seoul and Washington must ensure complete clarity as to their positions with respect to each other's role and expectations within their alliance, as well as their ties with Moscow. After the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, then South Korean President Park Geun-hye remained hesitant about following the U.S. approach of sanctioning Russia, particularly given Park's “Eurasia Initiative,” which centered around expanding and integrating transport, trade, and energy networks within Eurasia and thus involved cooperation with Russia.⁶³ South Korea's more cautious engagement with Russia saw a resultant gap between U.S. and South Korean policy toward Russia. In May 2024, then President Yoon expounded that despite Russia's war against Ukraine, aided by North Korea, South Korea would maintain a “smooth” relationship with Russia and review relations “on a case-by-case basis,” given burgeoning South Korea-Russia economic ties.⁶⁴ While President Lee has called for “stable management and development” of South Korea-Russia relations, South Korea must ensure that its policy toward Russia remains in line with that of the United States.⁶⁵ In this vein, Lee's appointment of Wi Sung-lac as South Korea's National Security Advisor may be a strategic choice, given Wi's former role as South Korea's Ambassador to Russia between 2011 and 2015.

As the war in Ukraine continues, South Korea looks to maintain its posture of providing humanitarian but not lethal assistance to Ukraine. In August 2023, South Korea announced that it would increase its humanitarian assistance to Ukraine to USD 394 million.⁶⁶ In April 2024, Seoul and Kyiv signed an agreement wherein South Korea pledged USD 2.1 billion in concession loans from 2024 to 2029.⁶⁷ Following a USD 13.7 billion arms deal with Poland signed in 2022, South Korea has supplied Poland with K2 tanks, K9 howitzers, and FA-50 fighter jets, which Poland subsequently directed to Ukraine.⁶⁸ In August 2025, Poland signed a second USD 6.7 billion deal for an additional 180 K2 tanks by 2030.⁶⁹ The Yoon administration—which took power two months after Russia’s initial invasion—repeatedly asserted how “all scenarios were under consideration” in relation to the possible supply of lethal assistance to Ukraine if Russia crossed a “red line.”⁷⁰ Yet even the deployment of North Korean troops to the Kursk region in October 2024 did not see Seoul provide lethal assistance to Kyiv.

These questions will continue to pervade amid North Korea’s refusal to denuclearize and Russia’s willingness to supply North Korea with technology to strengthen its nuclear programs. Beyond North Korea-Russia ties, the U.S. bombings of three Iranian nuclear facilities at Natanz, Fordo, and Isfahan on June 13, 2025, have only moved North Korea even further from offering any nuclear concessions. From North Korea’s perspective, while the bombings demonstrated the Trump administration’s ability to follow through on its rhetoric to intervene overseas, the underlying message was clear: by possessing nuclear weapons, North Korea could immunize itself from similar eventualities.⁷¹ With the United States and South Korea having negotiated a trade deal in October 2025, the U.S.-South Korea alliance now has space to focus more on security matters, which is crucial given the destabilizing regional and global effects of cooperation between China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea. Doing so, however, requires clear articulation of U.S. policy toward the Korean Peninsula; an understanding of expectations by both states—not least financial—of their alliance commitments; and a recognition on the part of the United States that the security of the Korean Peninsula is directly linked to that of the United States.

Conclusion

The intensifying cooperation between North Korea and Russia since the beginning of the war in Ukraine on February 24, 2022, presents clear security challenges to the United States, South Korea, and the U.S.-South Korea alliance. Throughout 2025, relations between Moscow and Pyongyang have moved beyond the security domain and evolved into multi-sectoral forms of collaboration across a range of issue areas, though the two states’ security cooperation remains integral.

With the Trump and Lee administrations in power, the U.S.-South Korea alliance faces challenges internal to the alliance coupled with a widening threat from North Korea beyond its escalating vertical nuclear proliferation. North Korea-Russia cooperation has thus compounded the challenges posed by North Korea at a time when, firstly, North Korea ultimately remains

unwilling both to denuclearize and negotiate with the United States and South Korea, and secondly, questions of the extent and durability of U.S. commitments to South Korea pervade.

Of particular concern for the U.S.-South Korea alliance is how North Korea-Russia cooperation is, at present, fulfilling the terms of cooperation outlined in the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Treaty of June 2024. At the same time, the alliance must also contend with the unity between China, Russia, and North Korea in terms of their shared opposition to U.S. alliances and leadership of the postwar international order. Recent meetings between Kim, Putin, and Xi in Beijing on September 3, together with the military parade in Pyongyang on October 10, attended by former Russian President Dmitry Medvedev, Chinese Premier Li Qiang, as well as other leaders of states in alignment with North Korea, underscore how North Korea seeks to project an image of lasting anti-western solidarity. The duration of the war in Ukraine is unlikely to constrain these challenges, further demonstrating the need for the U.S.-South Korea alliance, together with other regional and global allies and partners, to pursue a concerted strategy vis-à-vis North Korea's growing multi-sectoral cooperation with Russia. Such alliance coordination can start with building upon past strategies crafted by previous administrations in Seoul and Washington. Thus, the United States and South Korea must seek to enact their statements of mutual cooperation as affirmed in recent summits to strengthen areas of security cooperation, not only in seeking to deter—as best as possible—North Korea and its newfound ties with Russia, but also in preserving the core values of peace, freedom, and prosperity within the context of an increasingly strained international order.

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