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Russia-DPRK Strategic Partnership and Prospects for NATO-Indo-Pacific Cooperation

By Shin-ae Lee

Summary

Russia's relationship with the DPRK has entered a new phase. Pyongyang has emerged as a key supporter for Putin in continuing the war in Ukraine. More troubling is their joint challenge to the rules-based global order, as the Indo-Pacific and Transatlantic security dynamics become increasingly interlinked. The ongoing war in Ukraine highlights how cross-regional adversaries may exploit their partnerships to jeopardize US and its partners' shared values and norms, while magnifying their combined rhetoric on the global stage.

Despite enduring mutual mistrust and the transactional nature of the Putin-Kim relationship, the collaborative threat from Russia and North Korea is likely to persist and possibly draw in other challengers. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and Indo-Pacific Partners' (IPPs)—specifically South Korea and Japan—relatively passive stance on addressing North Korea's aggressions alongside Russia necessitates a reassessment. There is significant potential for NATO and Indo-Pacific nations by enhancing their cooperation in strategic communications to effectively counter the growing Russia-DPRK influence in the Global South and promote meaningful engagement with these countries.



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Russia-DPRK Transactional Friendships and Beyond

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has injected new momentum to the once lukewarm Russo-DPRK relations, elevating them to a new level. Most notably, their partnership carries new implications for the global security landscape and poses a challenge to the rules-based international order. On Russia's National Day in June 2024, Kim Jong Un celebrated North Korea's relations with Russia as an "[invincible comrade-in-arms](#)" and "[strategic partnership spanning a hundred years](#)." Vladimir Putin followed up by visiting Pyongyang for the first time since his last visit in 2000 and the two sides lauded the establishment of a "[comprehensive strategic partnership](#)", which included a commitment to provide immediate military assistance in the event of either side being in a state of war.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine [signifies](#) that the international order is facing its greatest threat in the post-Cold War era, while also revealing widening fractures in the global system. In this shifting geopolitical landscape, Russia and North Korea are drawing closer, each finding a partner to further their political objectives—Putin seeking support for the war in Ukraine, and Kim striving to escape North Korea's status as one of the world's most isolated rogue states.

The relationship between North Korea and Russia has historically ebbed and flowed with shifting geopolitical dynamics. After World War II, as the US and the Soviet Union vied for global dominance, Joseph Stalin, seeking to distract the US from Eastern Europe, partnered with Kim Il Sung, whose goal was to unify Korea under communism—an alliance that ultimately sparked [the Korean War](#). In 1961, the two sides formed a [quasi-alliance relationship](#) amid Cold War dynamics, but Pyongyang played on [Sino-Soviet](#)

[tensions to maximize its own benefits](#). After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Moscow abandoned Pyongyang and established diplomatic relations with Seoul in 1990. Moreover, Russia supported UN Security Council (UNSC) sanctions against North Korea through 2017 and maintained a [balanced relationship with both Koreas](#), while Pyongyang prioritized its relationships with Beijing and Washington.

[Uncertainties](#) persist regarding how far this long but ambivalent partnership can move forward, with its future seemingly dependent on [the unfolding events in Ukraine](#). Also, there is a discrepancy between rhetoric and reality. Both Moscow and Pyongyang lack the capacity and political will to engage deeply in matters far from their own borders. However, as the Indo-Pacific and Transatlantic security theaters become increasingly interlinked, their transactional partnership may serve to subtly fuel each other's aggression, advancing their respective political goal and intensifying overarching ramifications on the global stage. Together, Kim and Putin have taken a defiant stance against Western imperialism and have amplified their voice to [challenge](#) the current global order. Their combined actions and words are alarming for the democratic world and its shared values.

Strengthening Leverage Against the Rules-Based Order

The war in Ukraine highlights the growing cooperation between the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and Indo-Pacific Partners (IPPs)—including South Korea, Japan, Australia, and New Zealand—on security affairs, aligning with upholding international rules and universal values, despite nuanced differences in their priorities and approaches. However, it also forewarns how our adversaries can effectively

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leverage their partnerships to undermine these efforts. Due to their close geographic proximity to North Korea, South Korea and Japan are particularly vulnerable to the evolving threat posed by deepening Russo-North Korea ties.

Notably, the mutual support between Russia and North Korea has readily undermined the sanctions imposed by NATO member countries and Indo-Pacific nations to counter their unacceptable behaviors – including bullying other countries, violating human rights, and destabilizing international peace – in line with international rules and norms. Nothing is officially announced regarding their transactions, but Pyongyang has emerged as a crucial supporter for Putin in sustaining the war by providing [conventional weapons](#), reportedly including 152 mm artillery shells, 122 mm multiple rocket launchers, and Hwasong-11 ballistic missile. It even supplied arms to [the Wagner Group](#) in the early stages of the conflict. In return, North Korea is allegedly receiving a broad range of benefits from Russia, including [food, oil, military technology](#), which directly or indirectly facilitate Pyongyang’s nuclear and missile programs. Their transactions have undoubtedly violated [numerous UNSC resolutions](#): UNSCR 1718 and UNSCR 1874 for North Korea’s supplying arms to Russia, and UNSCR 2321 and UNSCR 2270, if Russia had indeed assisted North Korea with military technology, as is suspected by some.

Deepening bilateral cooperation in the cyber domain is also a cause of concern. North Korean hackers’ cyber heists, targeting cryptocurrency and other international financial systems, have functioned as key [financial backing for its nuclear and missile programs](#), effectively evading sanctions. North Korea is increasingly turning to [Russia-based exchanges](#) to launder illicit cryptocurrency, and it is said

that they are jointly developing [malware](#) for related cybercrimes. In addition, [Russia](#) has turned a blind eye to North Korean IT workers stationed in the country in violation of UNSC resolutions, presumably providing them with technological and operational support for their cybercrime activities. In light of the new strategic partnership between the two sides, which involves collaboration on [information and communication technology](#), their collaboration in cyber operations is likely to expand, further challenging international security.

In addition, with its permanent seat on the UNSC, Russia has successfully blocked UNSC efforts to place additional burdens on North Korea. It also allowed [the UN-mandated panel of experts](#) responsible for monitoring compliance with sanctions on North Korea to expire by using its veto in March 2024. However, their partnership does more than just paralyze the sanctions; it also aims further. Their commitment to establishing “[alternative mechanisms of trade and mutual settlements](#)” signals their [intent](#) to fundamentally challenge existing sanctions regimes.

Additionally, Russia’s strengthened partnership with North Korea makes the threat posed to South Korea and Japan more tangible and complicates their alignment with NATO in safeguarding the rules-based international order, including support for Ukraine. Russia has repeatedly warned both countries against supporting Ukraine, whether directly or in cooperation with NATO. Moscow has expressed its discomfort with Tokyo for demonstrating strong commitment to Ukraine, alongside other G7 partners, by providing approximately [\\$12 billion](#) in aid and endorsing sanctions. Russia has raised tensions over [the Kuril Islands](#)—an area Japan refers to the Northern Territories—

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where both countries claim territorial ownership, to apply pressure on Japan. Russia's growing partnership with North Korea [enables](#) Putin to further intimidate Japan over its involvement in Ukraine by hinting at Russia's ability to impose potential repercussions in the Indo-Pacific region.

To South Korea, Moscow has delivered more confusing yet still intimidating signals. While emboldening North Korea's aggression, it simultaneously asserts that its new partnership with North Korea is [not directed at South Korea](#) and expresses a desire to improve relations with Seoul. Amid South Korea's polarized political landscape, these ambiguous messages place additional pressure on the South Korean leadership. Seoul's increasing alignment with Western partners faces [domestic criticism](#) for its role in the recent acceleration of Russia-DPRK ties and the ensuing regional tensions, placing South Korea at the forefront of the new Cold War.

Meanwhile, Russia has issued more direct warnings regarding South Korea's [growing role in supplying arms](#) to NATO member countries, which helps replenish depleted stocks and supports the provision of weapons to Kyiv. Putin has also sternly warned Seoul that providing lethal weapons to Ukraine would be a "[big mistake](#)." Moscow has aimed to [deter South Korea](#) from deepening its engagement on rearming Ukraine, and a straightforward approach to achieving this is by threatening to enhance military assistance to Pyongyang, South Korea's top national security threat, with whom it remains technically at war. Pyongyang's successful launch of its first reconnaissance satellite and the introduction of new technology for its development further underscore the possibility of [Russian involvement](#) and the growing ramifications of military cooperation between the two nations. Putin has indeed

[implied](#) that Russia may provide military assistance to North Korea if the United States and its allies continue their military support to Kyiv. This message is significant not only for Seoul but also for Japan. Russia has warned Japan of "[grave consequences](#)" for their bilateral relations following Japan's provision of Patriot air defense missiles to the US after [revising its arms export policy](#)—a move that could facilitate US support for Ukraine.

Risk of Revisionist Narratives and the Global South

Putin shows no hesitation in expressing his strong [anti-colonial rhetoric](#) against US-led global order and his ambition of reviving [the Russian Empire](#). The invasion of Ukraine exemplifies his steps to realize these geopolitical ambitions. During his visit to Pyongyang, Putin hailed the Ukraine war as a "[fight against the imperialist hegemonistic policies of the US and its satellites against the Russian Federation](#)." Pyongyang has actively aligned itself with Russia's propaganda, blaming NATO and its partners, and has promoted their mutual defiance, amplifying their combined voice on the world stage.

Russia is strategically deepening its engagement with developing countries, often referred to as the [Global South](#), branding itself as an "anti-colonial" power that [champions the freedom and sovereignty of non-Western world, and contributes to shaping "a multipolar world order."](#) In line with this narrative, Russia seeks to entice these nations with a seemingly more equal and inclusive alternative, offering economic prospects without imposing specific standards or values, unlike Western coalitions. Moscow has intensified efforts to attract them to join Russia- and China-led groups such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and

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BRICS. The expansion of the [SCO](#) and [BRICS](#) is fundamentally intended to challenge US hegemony and promote a shift away from the US-led order. This strategic approach signifies Russia's political goal not only to counter Western sanctions but, more essentially, to realize "[the de-Westernization of the global order.](#)"

It is notable that Pyongyang's collaboration with Russia has made its aggression towards the US, its allies, and the global order they uphold more prominent in global discussions. By blatantly criticizing the US intervention in the Ukraine war as revealing "[the US sinister intention to realize its hegemonic aim by further expanding the proxy war for destroying Russia,](#)" North Korea justifies its political and military support of Russia's actions in Ukraine and its challenges to international norms and rules. Additionally, by attributing the conflict's escalation to NATO and Western imperialism, Pyongyang scorned the efforts of the US and its partners to maintain a Western-led world order, which it claims will inevitably fail as countries increasingly pursue their [own autonomous paths to development.](#)

Pyongyang revealed its strong resolve to deepen its cooperation with Russia toward establishing a "[new multi-polarized international order.](#)" The attendance of a delegation of North Korean ruling party officials at the [For the Freedom of Nations](#) forum hosted by Russia in February 2024, [explicitly aimed at](#) rallying non-Western countries against neocolonialism and the West-imposed 'rule-based order,' signifies the growing alignment in this context. Putin has no reason to refuse Pyongyang's support and has promoted their partnership in opposition to the US and its partners' interference in "[the establishment of a multipolarized world order based on mutual respect for justice.](#)"

The war in Ukraine has highlighted the widening rift between the Global South and the West. Many countries in the Global South are [disillusioned and even resentful](#) of what they perceive as the double standards of the Global North, have remained bystanders or refused to fully support the Western stance on Ukraine. While they often do not support the violation of sovereignty, these nations still seek [economic benefits](#) through cooperation with Russia. Under these circumstances, North Korea's partnership with Russia, self-proclaimed as a noble endeavor, not only resonates with rogue actors like Myanmar's junta—reportedly [supplying arms](#) to Russia—but also sends a troubling message to countries in the middle. While this may not directly push the Global South to align with Russia-DPRK ties, it may encourage them to justify cooperation with Russia as a rightful opposition to what they perceive as an unjust, US-dominated order and an outdated Cold War mentality. Furthermore, North Korea has pushed the limits in its engagements with Russia, making the Global South feel that they are not crossing the line—as long as their actions are less aggressive than Pyongyang's—even if those actions contradict international law or moral values.

A case in point, Vietnam is a troubling example in this context. It has hosted Putin and strengthened its "[comprehensive strategic partnership](#)" with Russia amid Putin's continued killing of civilians in Ukraine. While maintaining ties with Washington and being cautious about military support to Russia, Vietnam has turned a blind eye to Russia's aggression—praised by Putin as "[balanced and objective.](#)" The two frame their partnership as a pursuit of global peace and development and "[a just multipolar world order](#)"; but it ultimately facilitates Russia in escaping its isolation and reinforcing its war efforts.

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Need for Closer Attention and a New Approach

The collaborative threat from Russia and North Korea is likely to persist in the near term, with a chance of deepened cooperation from other actors, such as China and Iran, whether behind the scenes or openly. Putin and Kim recognize that their respective ambitions—reviving the Russian empire and achieving formal acknowledgment of North Korea’s status as a nuclear state—cannot be fully realized under the current global order, leading them to intensify their joint efforts to challenge it through revisionist narratives and defense cooperation.

NATO and Indo-Pacific nations have expanded their security ties against the backdrop of increasingly complex security dynamics. At the 2024 NATO summit in Washington, committed to pursuing practical cooperation with initiating [new flagship projects](#). Unfortunately, their focus often leans heavily towards Ukraine and China. This is to some extent understandable, given that Ukraine is grappling with aggressive hostilities and NATO’s primary concern in the Indo-Pacific is addressing [China’s challenges](#). Also, skepticism surrounds our ability to constrain Russia-DPRK ties, given our limited leverage over Russia’s move to overcome international isolation and Pyongyang’s negligible concern for its international reputation along with its already severed economic and political connections to most of the international community.

However, the tendency of NATO-Indo-Pacific cooperation to remain relatively passive in addressing North Korea’s aggressions alongside Russia is a cause for concern and warrants a reassessment. In examining the broader security dynamics across the Indo-Pacific and Transatlantic, it becomes clear that our challenges are deeply intertwined and mutually reinforcing. In this context, allowing the Russia-

DPRK partnership to proceed unchecked will inevitably weaken NATO’s efforts to tackle Russia’s war against Ukraine and to defend the rules-based order and institutions.

Most importantly, there is considerable scope for NATO and Indo-Pacific nations to work together more effectively to counter the expanding influence of the Russia-DPRK partnership in the Global South and to engage these countries constructively. False or manipulated messages from Russia and North Korea, intended to deceive or mislead, risk to [sway](#) potential partners, which could lead to reduced support for Ukraine’s fight for freedom and the rules-based international order, or even embolden further aggression. Their continued collaboration in shaping international hearts and minds is both likely and concerning, particularly given the new strategic partnership treaty, which includes [relevant clauses](#).

However, IPPs, particularly, Japan and South Korea, with their limited experience in strategic communications, have focused primarily on condemning adversaries and demonstrating resolve to oppose them, often missing the chance to counter Russian-DPRK disinformation and engage effectively with the broader global community. Meanwhile, NATO, due to the historical imperialist legacies of some member countries and a limited understanding of the Global South, sometimes struggles to present narratives that resonate with this region. The Western efforts to urge the world to denounce and isolate Russia for its violations of human rights and international law have hardly achieved the desired outcomes from the Global South. Meanwhile, a notable shift is observed in [the Global South’s perception of Russia](#), becoming increasingly positive from 2022 to 2024.

In this regard, [strategic communications](#) cooperation between NATO and strategic Asian nations needs to be enhanced to more effectively

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counter Russia-DPRK propaganda and better engage with the Global South through words and deliverables. NATO has extensive experience in strategic communications, adept at conveying messages through coordinated words and actions in support of political objectives. In addition, NATO has considerable expertise in detecting and debunking Russian disinformation. On the other hand, with a more sophisticated awareness of the Global South's needs and dynamics, Japan and South Korea are better equipped to engage in ways that are more likely to be embraced. Japan boasts a long history and [expertise](#) in building relationships with developing countries through its ODA as well as trade, investments, and technology assistance. Japan has built a strong reputation, particularly in Southeast Asia, where it consistently ranks as [the most trusted power](#). This trust is largely [attributed to](#) Japan's development assistance and economic engagement. South Korea's story of its transformation from a country marked by the hardships of colonial rule, poverty, and dictatorship to a developed liberal democracy, combined with its pragmatic approach, [resonates with](#) the Global South. South Korea's [human capital development](#) strategy, which helped it bypass the middle-income trap, stands out as an appealing guide for developing nations. At [the first Korea-Africa Summit](#) in June 2024, the African Union expressed its members' interest in learning Korea's know-how in human resources development, industrialization, and digital transformation. In this sense, they make good partners in developing Global South-tailored messages, both in words and corresponding actions, and in communicating these messages in a coordinated manner to support their political objectives of upholding global order and universal values—key elements for achieving greater credibility and impact in strategic communications.

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