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Issue Brief

South Korea's Response to Russia-North Korea 'Comprehensive Strategic Partnership'

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S*ummary*

The visit of Russian President Vladimir Putin to North Korea after a gap of almost 24 years in June 2024 validates the deepening relationship between Moscow and Pyongyang. The ongoing war in Ukraine since 2022 has brought Russia and North Korea closer. In this regard, the signing of a 'Comprehensive Strategic Partnership' agreement between Moscow and Pyongyang for mutual defence assistance has raised serious concerns in South Korea.

Introduction

The ongoing war in Ukraine since 2022 has brought Russia and North Korea closer. There have been allegations by the South Korean Defence Minister that North Korea has supplied huge quantities of weapons to Russia, and in return the Kim dynasty regime in Pyongyang has received some technological support from Moscow in building military reconnaissance satellite systems.¹ More recently, the visit of Russian President Vladimir Putin to Pyongyang in June 2024 after a gap of almost 24 years, and the signing of a ‘Comprehensive Strategic Partnership’ agreement between Russia and North Korea which has the provision for mutual military assistance in the event of any foreign aggression on either of them validates the deepening relationship between these two countries.²

However, this Russia–North Korea military alliance has raised serious concerns in South Korea. South Korea has even threatened to directly supply lethal weapons to Ukraine in response to Moscow’s support to Pyongyang.³ Notably, the inter-Korean relations have significantly deteriorated in the recent years. Earlier this year, the reclusive regime in North Korea even branded South Korea as an ‘enemy state’ and it has been destroying infrastructure and symbols related to the inter-Korean relations.

Since May 2024, North Korea has also sent thousands of trash-laden balloons towards South Korea causing damage to the properties.⁴ As a result, South Korea suspended the 2018 inter-Korean military agreement that was established to reduce tensions with North Korea. The South Korean government has also revived military activities including anti-Pyongyang propaganda broadcasting through loudspeakers near the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), which currently serves as the inter-Korean border.⁵ Apart from strengthening its own military capabilities, South Korea has been increasing cooperation with its allies and partners to counter North Korean provocations.

¹ Kim Arin, [“Seoul Defense Chief Accuses Russia of Using North Korean Weapons in Ukraine Attack”](#), *The Korea Herald*, 1 June 2024.

² Political News Team, [“Treaty on Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea and the Russian Federation Signed”](#), *The Rodong Sinmun*, 20 June 2024.

³ Kwak Yeon-soo, [“South Korea to Consider Supplying Weapons to Ukraine to Counter Russia-NK Military Cooperation”](#), *The Korea Times*, 20 June 2024.

⁴ Ranjit Kumar Dhawan, [“The Politics of North Korea’s ‘Garbage Balloons’ in South Korea”](#), Issue Brief, Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (MP-IDSA), 24 July 2024.

⁵ Kwak Yeon-soo, [“South Korea Resumes Loudspeaker Broadcasts as More Trash Balloons Arrive from North”](#), *The Korea Times*, 9 June 2024.

Russia–North Korea ‘Comprehensive Strategic Partnership’

After the division of the Korean Peninsula in 1945 by the Allied Powers, the Soviet Union played a crucial role in the establishment of North Korea. Subsequently, the military relationship between North Korea and Soviet Union was sealed through the 1961 treaty of ‘Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance’ which had the provision of ‘automatic’ military support in case there was an armed attack on either of them. In the post-Cold War period, North Korea and Russia signed another agreement in 2000 which restored the military engagement between these two countries.

The signing of ‘Comprehensive Strategic Partnership’ agreement between Russia and North Korea in June 2024 has elevated their military relationship to a higher level and it symbolises the strongest possible military alliance between Moscow and Pyongyang since the end of the Cold War. According to the North Korean state media *KCNA*, the June 2024 agreement between Russia and North Korea has the provision of mutual military assistance ‘without delay’ if any one of the two countries face armed aggression, and such mutual support would be guided in accordance with the principles of Article 51 of the United Nations Charter and the established laws of North Korea and the Russian Federation.⁶

Apart from mutual defence pact, the agreement also calls for cooperation in the arena of science and technology, nuclear energy and space research. However, the Russian support to North Korean nuclear weapons and ballistic missile development programmes would be detrimental to the security of South Korea and may encourage a new arms race in the East Asian region. The United States has also voiced its deep concerns over the Russian threat to provide weapons to Pyongyang.⁷ As a result, this Russia–North Korea partnership could have far-reaching consequences.

North Korea’s Rising Military Threats to South Korea

North Korea is already years ahead of South Korea in its nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles development programmes. Since 2006, North Korea has tested nuclear devices at least six times, and has launched several types of ballistic missiles, some of which are estimated to be capable of reaching the mainland of the United States. More recently, North Korea has also stepped-up the mass production of weapons.

⁶ [“DPRK-Russia Treaty on Comprehensive Strategic Partnership”](#), *KCNA*, 20 June 2024.

⁷ Justin McCurry and Andrew Roth, [“US ‘Incredibly Concerned’ Over Putin’s Threat to Supply Weapons to North Korea After Asia Tour”](#), *The Guardian*, 21 June 2024.

The newly inked Russia–North Korea defence pact would further enhance the military capabilities of North Korea. Ahead of Putin’s visit to North Korea in June 2024, reports noted that the Kim dynasty regime may be seeking advanced space, nuclear and ballistic missile technologies from Russia in exchange for Pyongyang’s supply of conventional arms to Moscow.⁸ The deepening cooperation between North Korea and Russia could increase the belligerence of the Kim dynasty regime towards the United States, Japan and South Korea. Remarkably, North Korea has even started threatening to ‘totally destroy’ its adversaries.⁹ In August 2024, North Korea deployed 250 new types of tactical ballistic missile launching systems which have the capability to severely undermine the security of South Korea.¹⁰

South Korea’s Response

As already stated, the relationship between North and South Korea has significantly deteriorated in the last few years. The bonhomie in the inter-Korean relations which appeared during the ‘progressive’ administration of former South Korean President Moon Jae-in (2017–2022) has faded away. On its part, South Korea has been exploring all possible measures to counter the military alliance between Moscow and Pyongyang. In the backdrop of deepening Russia–North Korea military relations, there has also been an increase in the demand for South Korea’s own nuclear weapons.¹¹ Apart from strengthening its own military capabilities, Seoul has been expanding its strategic engagement with the United States, China, Japan and the members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

Deepening Military Alliance with the United States

The military alliance between South Korea and the United States which was established in 1953 soon after the devastating Korean War (1950–1953), provides a solid deterrence against any North Korean aggression towards Seoul. This bilateral military alliance between the two countries has remained strong and has adapted to the changing circumstances.¹² As part of its ‘extended deterrence’, the United

⁸ Sarah Kim, “[Russia’s Putin Expected to Visit North Korea in a ‘Few Days’: Seoul](#)”, *Korea JoongAng Daily*, 13 June 2014.

⁹ Reuters, “[North Korea Vows to ‘Totally Destroy’ Enemy as Regime Marks End of Korean War](#)”, *The Guardian*, 28 July 2024.

¹⁰ Lee Hyo-jin, “[N. Korea’s 250 New Missile Launchers Could Overwhelm South’s Defense: Experts](#)”, *The Korea Times*, 5 August 2024.

¹¹ Lim Jeong-Won, “[South Korea Should Consider Independent Nuclear Deterrent in Wake of North-Russia Treaty: Think Tank](#)”, *Korea JoongAng Daily*, 24 June 2024.

¹² Youngshik Bong, “[Continuity Amidst Change: The Korea–United States Alliance](#)”, in Michael Wesley (ed.), *Global Allies: Comparing US Alliances In The 21st Century*, Acton, The Australian National University Press, 2017, pp. 45–57.

States has also provided ‘nuclear umbrella’ to South Korea.¹³ In the milieu of rising provocations from North Korea, the United States has reiterated its strong commitment to the security of South Korea.

Evidently, in the background of Russia’s recent defence pact with North Korea, Washington and Seoul have signed an agreement on the ‘Guidelines for Nuclear Deterrence and Nuclear Operations on the Korean Peninsula’ to integrate the American nuclear weapons capabilities with that of the advanced conventional forces of South Korea.¹⁴ This would indeed provide a strong deterrence against the North Korean nuclear threats. Also, the Commander of America’s Indo-Pacific command Adm. Samuel Paparo has stated that South Korea may receive nuclear-powered submarines in the coming times to bolster its defence capabilities. Adm. Paparo also raised concerns about the June 2024 summit meeting between the leaders of Russia and North Korea.¹⁵

Strategic Partnership with China

The relationship between China and South Korea has dramatically improved since the end of the Cold War and establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries in 1992. Subsequently, China has emerged as the largest trade partner, source of raw materials, tourists, foreign workers, and a massive market for South Korea. Cultural similarities, historical factors, geographical closeness, presence of a huge ethnic Korean diaspora and China’s close ties with North Korea have all contributed to South Korea’s interest in the ‘Middle Kingdom’.¹⁶ China and South Korea also established ‘Strategic Cooperative Partnership’ in 2008.

Therefore, China’s role would also be important in stabilising the rising conflict between the two Koreas. In fact, the ‘2+2 dialogue’ of foreign and defence officials of China and South Korea coincided with Putin’s visit to Pyongyang in June this year. There are also reports that the Sino-North Korean relations have become strained in recent years, which might have pushed the Kim dynasty regime to seek closer ties with Moscow.¹⁷ On the other hand, South Korea may also reach out to China to counter Russia–North Korea defence pact.¹⁸

¹³ Terence Roehrig, [“The U.S. Nuclear Umbrella Over South Korea: Nuclear Weapons and Extended Deterrence”](#), *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 132, No. 4, Winter 2017, pp. 651–684.

¹⁴ Lim Jeong-Won, [“South Korea, U.S. Form ‘Integrated’ Extended Deterrence System on Sidelines of NATO Summit”](#), *Korea JoongAng Daily*, 12 July 2024.

¹⁵ Yonhap, [“US Indo-Pacific Commander Says Korea’s Acquisition of Nuclear Submarines Could Be Considered in Future: Yoon’s Office”](#), *The Korea Times*, 14 July 2024.

¹⁶ Ranjit Kumar Dhawan, [“India’s ‘Act East’ Policy Towards the Two Koreas: Issues and Challenges”](#), *Strategic Analysis*, Vol. 42, No. 5, 2018, pp. 490–502.

¹⁷ Yonhap, [“NIS Closely Watching NK-China Ties Amid Signs of Rift”](#), *The Korea Times*, 31 July 2024.

¹⁸ John Burton, [“Seoul-Beijing Detente?”](#), *The Korea Times*, 26 June 2024.

Strengthening Ties with Japan

Although the relationship between South Korea and Japan is often marred by the historical and territorial disputes, in recent years, the relationship between the two neighbours appears to be strengthening. The United States has also played a constructive role in bringing together South Korea and Japan during the tenure of Joe Biden administration.¹⁹ South Korea along with the United States and Japan will participate in a multi-domain trilateral military exercise called ‘Freedom Edge’ from 2024 onwards.²⁰ On 28 July 2024, the three countries also established a ‘Trilateral Security Cooperation Framework’ to further enhance their military partnership.²¹

Both South Korea and Japan have been equally concerned about the deepening Russia–North Korea relations. Interestingly, South Korea and Japan have also shown maturity over the colonial history and about the atrocities committed on the Korean workers when the Korean Peninsula was under Japanese colonial occupation (1910–1945). This is evident from the recent cooperation between Seoul and Tokyo regarding the UNESCO World Heritage listing of the historical Sado mine of Japan where Korean miners were employed in exploitative conditions.²² In fact, Japan is also reported to be in secret negotiation with North Korea to improve bilateral relations and recently the representatives of the two countries held a meeting in Mongolia.²³

Practical Cooperation with the NATO

Apart from its collaboration with the United States, China and Japan, South Korea has also been developing its partnership with the NATO. In the backdrop of North Korea–Russia summit, the visit to the United States by the South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol to participate in the NATO summit in Washington DC during 9–11 July 2024 provided an important platform to voice concerns about the security situation in the Korean Peninsula. On the other hand, the NATO has also been seeking greater partnership with South Korea to develop ‘practical cooperation’ in building defence and cyber technologies.²⁴

¹⁹ Yonhap, [“Top Biden Officials Tout Improved Seoul-Tokyo Ties, Cooperation against NK Threats as Key Policy Feats”](#), *The Korea Times*, 6 August 2024.

²⁰ Kim Arin, [“Korea, US, Japan to Kick off 1st Trilateral Exercises This Year”](#), *The Korea Herald*, 2 June 2024.

²¹ Anna J. Park, [“S. Korea, US and Japan Sign Trilateral Security Cooperation Framework”](#), *The Korea Times*, 28 July 2024.

²² Mari Yamaguchi and Hyung-jin Kim, [“Japan’s Sado Gold Mine Gains UNESCO Status after Tokyo Pledges to Exhibit Dark WWII History”](#), *The Associated Press*, 27 July 2024.

²³ Seo Ji-Eun, [“North Korea, Japan Held Secret Meeting in Mongolia Last Month: Report”](#), *Korea JoongAng Daily*, 13 June 2024.

²⁴ Yonhap, [“NATO Seeks to Build Practical Cooperation With Korea on Ukraine, Defense Industry: Chief”](#), *The Korea Times*, 5 July 2024.

South Korea is also a member of the Indo-Pacific Partners 4 (IP4) countries which include Australia, Japan and New Zealand. The IP4 countries are cooperating with the NATO alliance to further strengthen security partnership in the Indo-Pacific region. During the recent summit of NATO and IP4 nations, the issue of Russia–North Korea military pact was also discussed. The NATO members criticised the export of lethal arms from North Korea to support Russia’s war in Ukraine.²⁵

Conclusion

The deepening military engagement between Russia and North Korea has increased the anxieties of the South Korean government. As a result, Seoul has been exploring every possible measure to counter the North Korean threat. In this regard, South Korean government has enhanced its cooperation with the United States, China, Japan and the NATO. The increasingly volatile situation on the Korean Peninsula has the potential to turn into a major regional conflict. Hence, it is important to initiate the peace process and revive the inter-Korean dialogue. South Korea may also seek support from the Southeast Asian nations and India to put pressure on North Korea against making threatening gestures towards Seoul. There is an urgent need for finding diplomatic solutions for the rising tensions on the Korean Peninsula.

²⁵ Anna J. Park, [“Yoon, NATO Leaders Condemn Threats Raised By N. Korea-Russia Ties”](#), *The Korea Times*, 11 July 2024.

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