

North Korea-Russia Relations: Current Developments

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Since 2023, North Korea (officially known as the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, or DPRK) and the Russian Federation (Russia) have upgraded their partnership, a development that could potentially boost Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and increase North Korea's military capabilities and its willingness to engage in provocative actions against the United States and U.S. allies in East Asia.

The Biden Administration in recent months has [designated for sanctions](#) North Korean individuals and entities conducting illicit cyber and crypto activities, weapons procurement and transfers (to Russia), and fuel trade that violates U.S. and United Nations Security Council (UNSC) restrictions. North Korea's contravention of these sanctions, with Russia's assistance, challenges long-held [U.S. policy, shaped and supported by several acts of Congress](#), aimed at persuading North Korea to give up its nuclear weapons in exchange for a potential loosening of sanctions. Strengthened North Korea-Russia bilateral ties potentially [embolden](#) North Korea to expand illicit activities and engage in provocations, and may improve DPRK military capabilities. The Administration has worked with South Korea and Japan to increase deterrence and [expand allied efforts](#) to counter North Korea's illicit efforts to evade sanctions, such as a new U.S.-South Korea task force to disrupt DPRK illicit imports of petroleum. Congress may consider whether to review Administration policies, examine implementation of unilateral and multilateral sanctions, and review the breadth and pace of North Korea-Russia cooperation as well as its impact on U.S. and allied forces.

An Expanding Partnership

In September 2023, North Korean leader [Kim Jong-un traveled to Russia's Far East](#), where he met with Russian President Vladimir Putin and visited Russia's newest spaceport, a [factory producing advanced jets](#), and [Russia's Pacific Fleet](#) in Vladivostok. It is Kim's only summit since 2019. High-level Russian and DPRK officials continue to meet in each other's capitals to develop the [partnership](#) in a broad range of areas, including economy, science, technology, and culture. In January 2024, the North Korean government [said](#) that Putin may soon travel to Pyongyang for a bilateral summit (the last time he traveled there was 2000). Some analysts have [expressed](#) concern that North Korea's expanded capabilities and support from Russia (and China) could give North Korea greater confidence to conduct aggressive diplomatic, military, or other actions to achieve its [objectives](#) in the coming years.

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Benefits for North Korea

According to the U.S. intelligence community's (IC's) 2024 [annual threat assessment \(ATA\)](#), Russia has been providing North Korea with “diplomatic, economic, and military concessions” in exchange for weaponry. Reportedly, Putin has said Russia is prepared to [help North Korea build and perhaps launch satellites](#). In addition to increasing exports of food to North Korea, Russia appears to have increased its exports of items prohibited by UNSC sanctions, [such as oil](#). Russia [reportedly](#) has unfrozen \$9 million in North Korean assets, is facilitating the DPRK's access to the world financial system, and reportedly continues to violate United Nations sanctions by [hosting North Korean workers](#). U.S. National Security Council spokesman Kirby [said](#) in January that “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.” In addition to [earning](#) hard currency and/or barter trade from arms sales, North Korea may gain useful [information](#) about how its missile systems [perform](#) on the battlefield, potentially accelerating North Korean [gains](#) in improving its ballistic missile capabilities. North Korea also has been [advancing](#) its nuclear weapons programs. Despite an expanding bilateral partnership, North Korea conducted cyberattacks on Russian [missile companies](#) and [government agencies](#) in 2023.

Benefits for Russia

According to some [estimates](#), Russia is firing at least 10,000 artillery shells at Ukraine each day. To sustain this rate of fire while it increases its domestic production capacity, Russia has turned to North Korea for artillery ammunition. The State Department [states](#) that North Korea has sent more than 10,000 shipping containers of ammunition or related materials (potentially containing more than 3 million rounds of artillery ammunition) to Russia since October 2023. Russia also has “fired more than 40 North Korean ballistic missiles” since late December 2023 against Ukrainian targets, according to official U.S. [statements](#). U.S. National Security Council spokesman John Kirby has [said](#) that the DPRK weapons have been used to “to target Ukraine's civilian infrastructure and to kill innocent Ukrainian civilians.” The IC's ATA [says](#) that by strengthening ties with North Korea (as well as China and Iran), Russia is “offsetting its decline in relations with the West.”

Evolving Russian Policy

Weapons transfers from North Korea violate at least 10 [UNSC sanctions](#) resolutions, which Russia supported when they were adopted in the 2000s and 2010s following North Korea's nuclear and missile tests. UNSC sanctions prohibit the purchase from or sale of arms to North Korea, among other restrictions. They also prohibit any assistance to North Korea's ballistic missile programs, including space or satellite launch activities. From 2006 to 2017, Russia (along with China) supported the adoption of 10 UNSC sanctions [resolutions](#). Russia also participated in past [talks](#) meant to persuade North Korea to denuclearize. Since at least 2022, however, Russia has reversed course. During 2022 and 2023, China and Russia [blocked](#) U.S.-led efforts at the UNSC to adopt stricter sanctions on Pyongyang following DPRK ballistic missile tests. In March 2024, Russia voted against the renewal of a U.N. expert panel charged with monitoring sanctions implementation; its representative [said](#) that the panel was “losing its relevance” and sanctions should be reviewed. Since 2006, the panel has [documented](#) North Korea's efforts to evade sanctions, including ship-to-ship transfers of oil and coal in the waters off China's and Russia's coasts. Forcing the dissolution of the panel [may be](#) part of Russia's move to more openly engage in banned trade and other activities with North Korea. This change in Russian policy toward North Korea may indicate a larger [departure](#) from Moscow's historical alignment with the United States on nonproliferation policy, and may be helping North Korea achieve its military and foreign policy [goals](#).

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