Stanford Indo-Pacific Policy Lab
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# China-Russia Security Cooperation in the 2020s:

SHAKY FOUNDATIONS

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## How do you conceptualize the DPRK-China-Soviet alignment?

To understand China-Russia alignment today, we must also understand the role that the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea) plays in the region. Russia's failure to win its war against Ukraine has brought it back into alliance with North Korea. The DPRK has entered this alliance partly to offset the unwelcome dependence on China it has endured since the USSR abandoned it in 1990. Moscow is getting desperately needed ammunition and manpower from North Korea, while Pyongyang receives money, oil, military technology, and a new Comprehensive Strategic Partnership.

North Korea's new relationship with Russia has also elevated its standing with China. At the military parade Beijing held on September 3, 2025, to celebrate the 80th anniversary of the defeat of Japan, Xi Jinping stood shoulder-to-shoulder with Kim Jong Un, on one side, and Vladimir Putin on the other, suggesting that North Korea may be regaining the triangular alliance system that served it so well from 1960 to 1990. Indeed, to a certain extent the geopolitical logic that drove Russia and China to support the DPRK during the Cold War applies now as they seek to forge a powerful bloc of anti-Western authoritarian states.

## How did the DPRK-China-Soviet relationship change over time?

History can best explain the China-Russian alignment of today, especially the history of communist alignments in the region, and the profound mistrust both the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea) and China have had toward Moscow.

Let's start with Soviet/DPRK relations. After its defeat of Japan in August 1945, the Soviet Union created the DPRK to establish a Soviet-style state in its zone. Moscow's goal was to create a buffer to protect the USSR from a future attack by a remilitarized Japan. This required a reliable leader. With few available options, the Soviets chose Kim Il Sung, a young guerrilla fighter who had taken refuge in Siberia in 1941 and had served in the Red Army ever since. As would be expected, Kim Il Sung willingly subordinated himself to his Soviet superiors once in office. Material conditions required such a relationship, since the northern half of Korea was abruptly severed from the southern part of the peninsula as well as from Japan and Manchuria. In 1948, Moscow created a strong army for the DPRK, but Kim Il Sung could not deploy it against the South without Stalin's approval. As Kim explained to

Soviet officers in January 1950, "he is a Communist, a disciplined person and for him the order of Comrade Stalin is law."[1]

But Kim Il Sung's relationship with his Soviet mentor shattered less than a year later, in October 1950, when the Chinese leadership debated whether to send its soldiers across the Yalu River to rescue North Korea from imminent destruction. Stalin refused to deploy his powerful air force to protect the Chinese troops out of fear that such intervention would lead to a war with the United States that the USSR was not able to win. Stalin then ordered Kim Il Sung to withdraw his remaining army into China to, an order he reversed just a day later, when the PRC decided to enter Korea even without Soviet air cover. Once Chinese troops successfully engaged U.S. forces in Korea, Stalin ordered Soviet air units to defend the Yalu River bridges. But they were expressly forbidden from operating outside the Yalu corridor, leaving the rest of North Korean territory undefended from American bombers—a decision Kim Il Sung never forgot.

Once China saved North Korea, Stalin decided the war could be useful to the Soviet Union. Keeping the U.S. military stuck in Korea for two to three years would give the newly subordinated states of Eastern Europe time to build up their military strength before any attack against the USSR could be mounted from the West. Stalin therefore instructed the North Korean and Chinese negotiators at the armistice talks to go slow and not agree to U.S. proposals.

By early 1952, when the North Korean leadership expressed a desire to end the war to stop the saturation bombing by the United States, Stalin insisted that they continue to fight. Mao seconded this position, since the Soviets were sending advisors and equipment to transform PLA forces in Korea into a modern army. Kim Il Sung was thus forced to endure the physical destruction of his country to further the security interests of the USSR and the PRC. As soon as the armistice was signed, he insisted that his allies rebuild the DPRK, which they did, since North Korea was now on the front line of a militarized Cold War. This is how Kim Il Sung—and North Korea writ large—gained the ability to extract aid from North Korea's patrons while nurturing profound mistrust and resentment toward them.[2]

China has also mistrusted Moscow since the early days of the Chinese Communist Party. In 1921, Soviet officials instructed members of the Chinese Communist Party to form a united front with the Nationalists—an arrangement that ended in a massacre of communists in 1927. The remaining Chinese Communist Party became more independent of Moscow as a result, especially as it created new bases in remote areas under the leadership of Mao Zedong during the Long March of 1934-35.

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[1] Ciphered Telegram from Shtykov to Vyshinsky, 19 January 1950. For full text and analysis see Kathryn Weathersby, "To Attack or Not to Attack? Stalin, Kim Il Sung and the Prelude to War," *Cold War International History Project Bulletin,* Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars (Spring 1995): 8.

[2] Kathryn Weathersby, "North Korea and the Armistice Negotiations," *Transactions of the Royal Asiatic Society Korea Branch* (Seoul, 2016); K. Weathersby, "The Soviet Union," in James Matray, ed. *Ashgate Research Companion to the Korean War* (2014).

When Japan invaded China proper in 1937, Moscow's overriding goal was to weaken Japan, fearing that Tokyo would again invade Siberia. It therefore refrained from wholesale support for the CCP over the much stronger KMT. This pattern of ambivalent backing continued during China's civil war.

When the PRC was established in October 1949, Mao Zedong had ample reason to mistrust Soviet intentions. His new state, however, was in desperate need of assistance from Moscow. Stalin still hesitated to sign a treaty with Beijing, because he feared it would jeopardize the territorial gains he had extracted from the Nationalists in 1945. It was not until the United States' new strategic policy for East Asia was adopted in late December 1949, which placed Taiwan and the ROK outside the American defense perimeter, that Stalin felt comfortable advancing the Soviet sphere of influence up to that line. The resulting treaty with Beijing was far-reaching, providing massive economic and military assistance to China, including the construction of a navy and air force.

The history between the PRC and the DPRK is perhaps simpler. In 1932 the Soviet-run Communist International (Comintern) dissolved the Korean Communist Party for its excessive nationalism, an anti-Marxist deviation. Tens of thousands of Korean communists, including Kim Il Sung, were instructed to join the Chinese party and fought the Japanese alongside their Chinese comrades in Manchuria and northern China. Although these relationships included close personal ties and were more collegial than either group had with the Soviets, they were inevitably colored by the centuries-old pattern of Korean submission to Chinese hegemony.

While the CCP allowed Korean partisans to return to their homeland after 1946, significantly strengthening the Korean People's Army, the young Kim Il Sung saw these returnees as a threat to his hold on power. In the first weeks of the 1950 invasion, the North Korean leader ignored the warnings from far more experienced Chinese officers that his line was overstretched and that UN forces would land in his rear. When Chinese troops entered Korea in October to rescue the KPA, Beijing demanded the creation of a unified command led by PLA officers. Stalin sided with the PRC and ordered the North Korean leadership to agree to Chinese demands. After the war turned into a stalemate, Mao insisted the North Koreans continue to fight to give time for Soviet advisers to train and equip Chinese troops with modern weapons and logistics. Consequently, after Stalin's death in March 1953, Kim Il Sung began to present himself to the North Korean people as the sole leader of the Great Fatherland Liberation War, ignoring the Chinese contribution.[3]

These cracks in the alliances continued just below the surface. The Soviet Union, for instance, provided massive economic and military assistance to both China and North Korea following the Korean War, and the PRC left one million soldiers in the DPRK to serve as laborers for reconstruction.

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[3] Zhihua Shen and Yafeng Xia, *A Misunderstood Friendship, Mao Zedong, Kim Il-Sung, and Sino-North Korean Relations, 1949-1976* (Columbia University Press, 2018): chapters 1-2; Sergei N. Goncharev, John W. Lewis, and Xue Litai, *Uncertain Partners: Stalin, Mao, and the Korean War* (Stanford University Press, 1993).

But in February 1956, when Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev announced a new policy for all Communist parties that banned cults of personality and declared peaceful coexistence with the West, Kim Il Sung persuaded the KWP to refrain from implementing Khrushchev's new line, prompting Moscow and Beijing to send high-level representatives to Pyongyang to force compliance. When Hungary responded to Khrushchev's policies with massive public demonstrations against Soviet overlordship, however, Mao urged the Soviet leader to suppress the uprising by force—which took attention away from North Korea while also discrediting Khrushchev's leadership. Kim Il Sung was left free to continue his cult of personality and his highly militarized conflict with the ROK and the United States.[4]

Mao Zedong, meanwhile, who viewed himself as Khrushchev's revolutionary superior, shelled islands in the Taiwan Straits, attacked Indian forces along the border, and dismissed the danger of nuclear war. Khrushchev feared Mao's "adventurism" would drag the USSR into war with America and declined to provide the PRC with promised nuclear technology. Mao suspected, not without reason, that Moscow considered annexing Chinese territory along its border, and Beijing resented the high prices the Soviets had charged for supplying the war in Korea. By 1960 the alliance had ruptured, and the two states declared each other their primary enemy.

The Sino-Soviet split famously afforded Kim Il Sung the ability to play one patron against the other to secure continued support despite his "adventurism," such as the seizure of the *USS Pueblo* in January 1968. Mikhail Gorbachev's rise to power in Moscow in 1985 changed this dynamic, as he mended relations with Beijing in 1989 and grew less willing to bankroll Pyongyang. In 1990 Gorbachev turned to Seoul for a desperately needed financial infusion, agreeing to South Korea's demand for diplomatic recognition and the cessation of military aid to North Korea. Pyongyang's acrimonious response to this betrayal so angered the Soviets that they demanded the DPRK pay for its oil imports in hard currency at world market prices. Without Russian oil, North Korea's economy began to implode, while the PRC followed Moscow's lead by establishing diplomatic ties with South Korea in 1992. As it slid into famine, the DPRK began to build its own nuclear weapons, freed from the constraints previously imposed by its patrons.

## What are the implications for scholars as well as U.S./allied policymakers?

The history of this triangular alliance has left all three states with a keen awareness that the present circumstances can change abruptly. Given the extraordinary damage the Ukraine war is causing Russia, Putin's successor may well change course, leaving North Korea stranded once again. In the

[4] Andrei Lankov, *Crisis in North Korea, The Failure of De-Stalinization, 1956* (University of Hawaii Press, 2005); Balazs Szalontai, *Kim Il Sung in the Khrushchev Era: Soviet-DPRK Relations and the Roots of North Korean Despotism, 1953-1964* (Woodrow Wilson Center Press, Stanford University Press, 2005).

meantime, Beijing is warily navigating this new alignment between its erstwhile allies, eager to gain advantage against the common enemy while remaining vigilant against a self-serving move by its much weaker neighbors that could endanger China's new global prominence. As U.S. policymakers craft a response to the significant military challenges that the new Moscow/Beijing/Pyongyang alliance brings, they would do well to remember that these relationships rest on shaky foundations.

## A Note on Sources:

The gradual opening of Russian and Chinese archives in the 1990s and 2000s transformed our understanding of the Moscow/Pyongyang/Beijing alliance. After access to these sources was cut off, historians mined valuable records in the archives of former Soviet bloc countries in Eastern Europe. Translations of many of these documents can be found online through the Cold War International History Project and the North Korean International Documentation Project of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. The Korean War Archive Project of Korea University gained access to important records from the archive of the Ministry of National Defense of the Russian Federation, as well as systematizing and publishing relevant records of the ROK Defense Ministry. Published works by numerous scholars who have used these archival sources provide access to much of their content.