



# Contemporary China-Russia-North Korea Alignment:

## TACTICAL OR STRATEGIC?

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Last fall, when [images](#) surfaced of Xi Jinping presiding over the World War II “victory day” parade in Beijing with Vladimir Putin to his right and Kim Jong Un to his left, the world witnessed China-Russia-North Korea unity like never before. This show of unity is significant not only because all three members are autocratic regimes but because they are the only nuclear-armed states in East Asia. Moreover, while the recent [China-Russia alignment](#) falls short of a formal military alliance, the trilateral alignment includes bilateral military treaties between China and North Korea and Russia and North Korea, the latter of which was [updated](#) in 2024 to oblige both sides to automatically aid each other if attacked.

While experts have scrutinized the closer alignment between [China and Russia](#), this alignment does not automatically mean closer Chinese and Russian alignment with North Korea.

The reasons driving Beijing and Moscow’s alignment with Pyongyang—and the implications for the region—thus merit closer investigation. Specifically, are China and Russia’s closer ties with North Korea best explained by tactical decisions following Russia’s complications in Ukraine? Or are they better explained by strategic decisions that follow from structural changes, such as those that traditional theories of [threat balancing](#) and [power politics](#) focus on? These accounts are not necessarily antithetical to each other; both may occur simultaneously. But it is important to distinguish between them because Donald Trump has publicly expressed an interest in meeting with Kim and the implications for new U.S.-North Korea talks will be different based on whether the autocratic alignment is a make-shift arrangement or a structure that is being built to last.

## Tactical Alignment

One explanation for the trilateral authoritarian alignment centers on the war in Ukraine as a tactical reason for China and Russia to strengthen ties with North Korea. According to this account, Russia’s difficulties in Ukraine opened up space for North Korea to provide political and military support in return for military and economic assistance. Closer Russia-North Korea relations, in turn, incentivized China to court North Korea and prevent a loss of influence over the regime.

From Russia’s perspective, North Korea’s military assistance was much more than a symbolic act of support. According to [one study](#), North Korea supplied over [5 million](#) rounds of ammunition by spring

2025, which may amount to 40% of the rounds Russia fired since deliveries began in 2023. By January 2025, approximately 4,000 North Korean soldiers deployed to Ukraine had died, and in February, an additional 3,000 soldiers were deployed. Experts have assessed North Korea's role in Ukraine as "vital" or "crucial" to Russian advancements in the war.

From China's perspective, its twin goals with respect to North Korea are maintaining influence and stability. China is already North Korea's largest trading partner and holds the key to applying more pressure on the regime. When Beijing feels that Pyongyang is destabilizing the Korean peninsula, it has shown a willingness to exercise its influence. For instance, during the "fire and fury" crisis between Trump and Kim in 2017, China appeared to distance itself from aiding North Korea in a war. Any time North Korea has drifted closer to Russia or to the United States, however, Beijing has historically worked to strengthen ties with Pyongyang. Maintaining influence over North Korea is key to China maintaining stability on the Korean peninsula.

From North Korea's perspective, there are many positives from an alignment with Russia and China. Closer ties to Russia mean technological assistance for Pyongyang's missile program, breathing space for its economy, and a counterweight to China. Meanwhile, China's courtship of North Korea serves as a useful hedge against Pyongyang's relationship with Moscow should the relationship deteriorate when the war in Ukraine ends. And closer ties with both Russia and China have helped North Korea stave off new economic sanctions, assuage the regime's desire for status and recognition as a nuclear power, and perhaps gain a greater sense of security.

## Implications of Tactical Alignment

If China and Russia's closer ties with North Korea are providing the regime with an elevated sense of security and status, in the short term, we might expect greater stability from North Korea. The regime tends to provoke neighbors when it wants something it cannot get otherwise. But because North Korea benefits from closer relations with Russia and China, and China wants stability on the Korean peninsula, North Korea would likely not want to jeopardize Russia and China's current willingness to court the regime. Instead of throwing tantrums and worrying Moscow and Beijing, Pyongyang is likely to use this period of alignment to inject breathing room into its economy and continue strengthening nuclear capabilities.

But this also means that North Korea would likely be less motivated to talk with the United States. Although Kim wants more relief from sanctions and greater recognition as a nuclear power, both can be provided by Russia and China to some extent. As we've already seen, Kim brushed aside Trump's overtures to meet when the latter attended the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation meeting in South Korea last fall.

At the same time, however, the unprecedented trilateral alignment gives North Korea political and diplomatic leverage against the United States that the regime is unlikely to squander. If tactical shifts resulting from Russia's difficulties in Ukraine are driving Russia and China to pursue closer relations with North Korea, North Korea would likely predict that those close ties will unravel when the war ends. North Korea has a reason, then, to talk with the United States before its ties with China and Russia deteriorate—and before Trump's interest in a meeting dissipates. In this scenario, although Russia loses interest in North Korea, Kim takes steps to reduce reliance on China by creating leverage through a meeting with Trump.

## Strategic Alignment

Alternatively, China and Russia's closer ties with North Korea may continue even after Russia's situation in Ukraine improves and the tactical reasons for bilateral alignment fade. There are two scenarios here: (1) only Russia has made a strategic decision for long-term alignment with North Korea, or (2) China also makes a strategic decision to align with North Korea.

In the first scenario, Russia is driven by structural and ideological factors to strategically align with North Korea. One [expert](#) argues that over the years, Putin has become increasingly disillusioned with the West and decided to pursue closer ties with North Korea since even before the war in Ukraine. As a result, Russia abandoned its policies of maintaining equidistance between the two Koreas and denuclearizing North Korea. Another expert argues that [Putin's ideology](#) importantly drives Russian foreign policy; if so, Putin may find a natural partner in Kim.

In this scenario, however, China continues to react tactically by courting North Korea. The aim is to prevent losing influence over Pyongyang. Some experts have described China's relations with its partners as "[half in, half out](#)," and if Beijing's alignment with Pyongyang is only a tactical shift, the relationship is unlikely to strengthen much further. If this is the scenario that is currently unfolding, the unprecedented show of trilateral unity at China's "victory day" parade last year does not signify the beginning of deeper alignment to counter the United States. Nevertheless, we can expect displays of China-North Korea camaraderie to continue even after the war in Ukraine ends.

In the second scenario, China follows Russia and makes a strategic decision to align with North Korea. Beijing has already [complained](#) about the closer cooperation within the U.S.-led security architecture in the region, such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, the AUKUS partnership between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States, and warming South Korea-Japan relations. Several additional causes could prompt China to align more closely with North Korea, including deeper Russia-North Korea alignment, U.S. policies that China perceives as confrontational, and a breakthrough in U.S.-North Korea talks. Recent events in Venezuela and the U.S.-Israel strikes on Iran may also contribute to China trying to pull North Korea closer.



Measuring a Chinese strategic decision for deeper alignment with North Korea, however, is tricky. Several measures have been developed to gauge [China-Russia alignment](#), but China and North Korea are in a military alliance already, which means different measures may be needed to capture a Chinese strategic decision to align more closely with North Korea. An especially concerning indicator would be a greater willingness from North Korea to support China in a Taiwan contingency. This author's discussions with South Korean experts have revealed concerns that North Korea's two new Choe Hyon-class [destroyers](#) built in 2025 not only allow the Korean People's Navy to increase its operational reach significantly beyond the Korean peninsula but could indicate North Korea's intentions to offer China military support in a conflict over Taiwan. Pyongyang has [announced](#) plans to produce two destroyers or larger ships annually.

## Implications of Strategic Alignment

If China and Russia continue to strengthen ties with North Korea even after Russia's tactical interest in the regime fades, what does it mean for the United States and its allies in the region?

Continued China-Russia-North Korea alignment makes it more difficult for U.S. allies to stand in the middle ground between the United States and China. Washington has been calling on its allies for greater solidarity for some time, but these allies have felt uneasy about doing so because they worry about jeopardizing their trade relations with China. Sustained unity between Beijing, Moscow, and Pyongyang, however, may encourage greater unity between U.S. allies and Washington.

Last August, for instance, South Korea's progressive president, Lee Jae Myung, acknowledged that South Korea has tended to rely on the United States for security while relying on China for trade but also said that maintaining this logic is "[no longer possible](#)" and that South Korea "cannot act or make decisions that go against America's basic policy stance." A month later, he did not [attend](#) China's "victory day" parade; the Speaker of the National Assembly, Wonshik Woo, attended instead. This contrasts with South Korea's conservative president Park Geun-hye, who attended the parade in 2016 to improve ties with China but moved forward with plans to deploy the US Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system in South Korea. Beijing later retaliated economically by restricting Chinese tourists from visiting South Korea.

That said, deeper China-Russia-North Korea alignment alone may be inadequate for South Korea and Japan to overcome issues of [history](#) and align more deeply. In other words, although Seoul and Tokyo may find it easier to stand with Washington, greater alignment between Seoul and Tokyo will likely take more work. To be sure, there is [evidence](#) that South Koreans have become more open to cooperation with Japan in recent years. Experts have also expressed [surprise](#) at the degree of continuity between the Lee administration's Japan policy and the previous conservative government's policy to strengthen ties with Japan. Yet to overcome the historical divide between



South Korea and Japan and forge greater trilateral alignment with the United States, stronger leadership from Washington and greater political initiative from Seoul and Tokyo will be needed.

A third implication of the authoritarian trilateral alignment concerns the prospects of new Trump-Kim talks. If the alignment is the result of tactical decisions only, fresh Trump-Kim talks have the valuable opportunity to delay or forestall North Korea being pulled closer into alignment with its autocratic allies. While current debates about potential Trump-Kim talks have focused on arms control, deterrence, and even a peace deal, Washington should pay greater attention to using such talks to influence Kim's calculus on closer alignment with China and Russia.

If strategic decisions by Russia and China are driving alignment with North Korea, however, U.S. attempts at arms control talks with North Korea are more likely to fail. Pyongyang would not only have less incentive to talk with Washington as mentioned previously but could view arms control in the context of Washington's failed attempts to get Moscow and Beijing to the negotiating table and resist breaking rank from the authoritarian bloc.

Yet fresh U.S.-North Korea talks could be a valuable opportunity to open lines of communication and better manage future crises. Deeper authoritarian alignment would likely result in greater polarization of the region and more friction between the two camps. Washington would then need to manage tensions in the region by keeping lines of communication open and minimizing misperceptions. Whether Moscow and Beijing's alignment with Pyongyang is tactical or strategic, therefore, is a critical prior question to assessing the extent to which competition between the two emerging camps is being driven by aggressive intentions or by a security dilemma.