



Contemporary China-Russia-North Korea Alignment:

THE LONG VIEW

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The photos of Xi Jinping, Vladimir Putin and Kim Jong Un at the September 2025 anniversary of the end of the Pacific War telegraphed that the three parties are entering a period of closer alignment. Yet North Korea's two bilateral relationships with its major patrons have a long and fraught history. Significant periods of that history are more exemplary of the well-known alliance risks of entanglement (for Russia and China) and abandonment (for North Korea) than of alignment.

In considering North Korea's current alignment with China and Russia, it is thus worth starting with a longer view. In doing so, I draw on a variety of indicators that North Korea watchers have used to divine North Korea's foreign policy intentions: actual agreements, up to and including its two formal treaty alliances with China and Russia; [peace proposals](#); speeches by Kim Jong Il and Kim Jong Un; the frequency and output of leaders' meetings (for example in joint statements and readouts); and the content and timing of UNSC resolutions on the peninsula, in which Chinese and Russian votes are decisive.

Yet it is also worthwhile to have a sense of the underlying political economy of these two relationships and how they have evolved. For much of the post-Cold War period, China has maintained its role as North Korea's most significant trading partner, even during periods when it has also imposed sanctions. North Korea ran large current account deficits with China, importing capital goods, oil, intermediate products, and even consumer goods. Korean exports were dominated by raw material and select foodstuffs, such as seafood. By contrast, Russia has played a relatively limited economic role with North Korea because of the lack of obvious complementarities. Not until the opportunity provided by the Ukraine war could North Korea use its arms industry as a cash cow to expand imports of Russian goods, including oil, food and technology products.

To understand this realignment and its implications, I tell the story in three acts. First, the end of the Cold War was a defining moment and set in motion the increasing dependence of the DPRK on China. The next period can be dated to the onset of the second nuclear crisis in 2002-3, when North Korea was found to be violating commitments it appeared to make under the Non-proliferation Treaty. That period extends through the onset of nuclear tests in 2006 to 2017, when Donald Trump threatened to rain "fire and fury" if it were to initiate armed conflict. The crucial political issue in this period was the exact approach that the U.S. would take toward North Korea's denuclearization and the extent to which China and Russia would materially support it. The last period encompasses the promise of the

U.S.-North Korea summit era (2018-19) and its ultimate collapse at Hanoi, which bred skepticism in all three parties that a settlement with the U.S. is possible. As a result, the sanctions regime the U.S. and its allies had crafted through the United Nations Security Council gradually unraveled, providing new lines of support for the regime in Pyongyang.

The Ukraine war has only made the drivers behind the China-North Korea-Russia realignment more apparent. But for both of the bilateral relationships with North Korea, an enduring question remains. What price are Beijing and Moscow really willing to pay to support Kim Jong Un's various military and economic ambitions? Do the relationships have red lines?

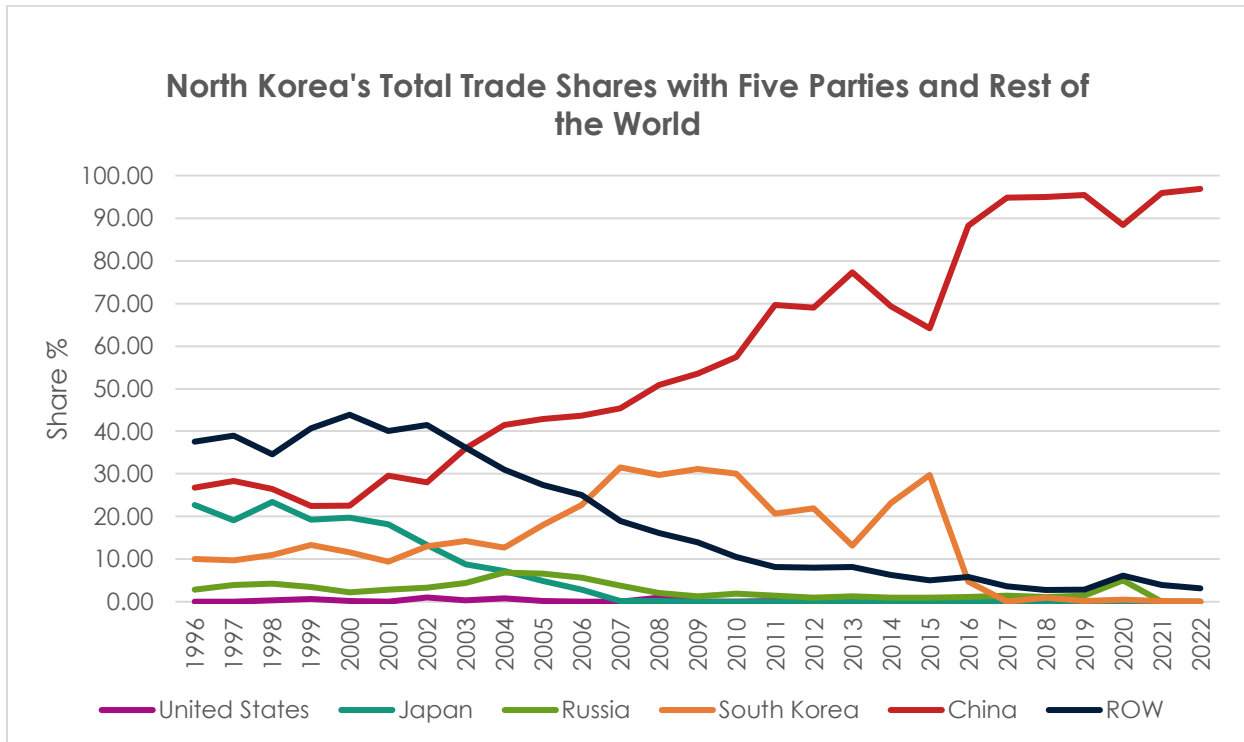
The End of the Cold War on the Peninsula: Abandonment

Pressed by mounting economic constraints in the late 1980s, Mikhail Gorbachev sought to normalize Soviet relations with South Korea as one component of his “new thinking,” an incipient effort to craft a more forward Asia policy. The sense of betrayal in Pyongyang was profound, and we have [excellent accounts](#) of the difficult diplomacy between the two countries in the lead-up to cross-recognition in September 1990. China quietly followed suit in August 1992 with somewhat less diplomatic rancor.

A defining economic feature of the new diplomatic order was that both the Soviet Union and China demanded that North Korea pay for imports in hard currency instead of barter trade, which took place at so-called “friendship” prices that effectively constituted foreign aid. A key pillar of support for North Korea was thus kicked away. Trade with Russia virtually collapsed. China stepped in to some extent, but a [detailed analysis of food exports](#) shows that Chinese trade was not enough to stave off North Korea's great famine of the early 1990s. Moreover, neither China nor Russia vetoed a 1993 UNSC resolution condemning North Korea's withdrawal from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. In the wake of this first nuclear crisis, Russia even renounced its mutual defense treaty with North Korea in 1995. This period was a clear example of dealignment and abandonment, and given the famine and regime transition following the death of Kim Il Sung in 1994, an extraordinarily perilous moment.

Economic relations with China warmed over the second half of the 1990s and took off in the 2000s, [partly because of a global commodity boom](#). China's take-off sucked in natural resources from the rest of the world and North Korea—with deposits of iron and coal—was no exception. Zhang Zemin visited in 2001 and relations further improved under Hu Jin-tao. [James Reilly shows](#) that this thaw can be seen not only in the underlying economic data, but in other commonly used measures of North Korea's foreign policy alignment: a sharp increase in high-level visits between the 1990s and 2000s, including a visit by Hu Jintao himself in 2005; in the outline of a broad economic framework by Chinese Vice Premier Wu Yi during a visit to Pyongyang in 2005; and in over a dozen discrete economic agreements.

In the trade data, this shift is reflected not only in the steady increase in China’s trade *share* (Figure 1) but in North Korea’s ability to run a persistent current account deficit with the country. Whatever strategic objectives might have driven this new economic alignment, however, it also reflected efforts by Beijing to wean North Korea from aid and to nudge Kim Jong Il toward reform and opening—in effect to align North Korea around a very different economic relationship.



The Second Nuclear Crisis

The onset of the second nuclear crisis in 2002-3 complicated North Korea’s relations with both China and Russia because of their support for the 1994 Agreed Framework—which the United States was in the process of scuttling—and commitment to the wider NPT commitments it embodied. Both countries—as a matter of declaratory policy—took the position that North Korea should denuclearize.

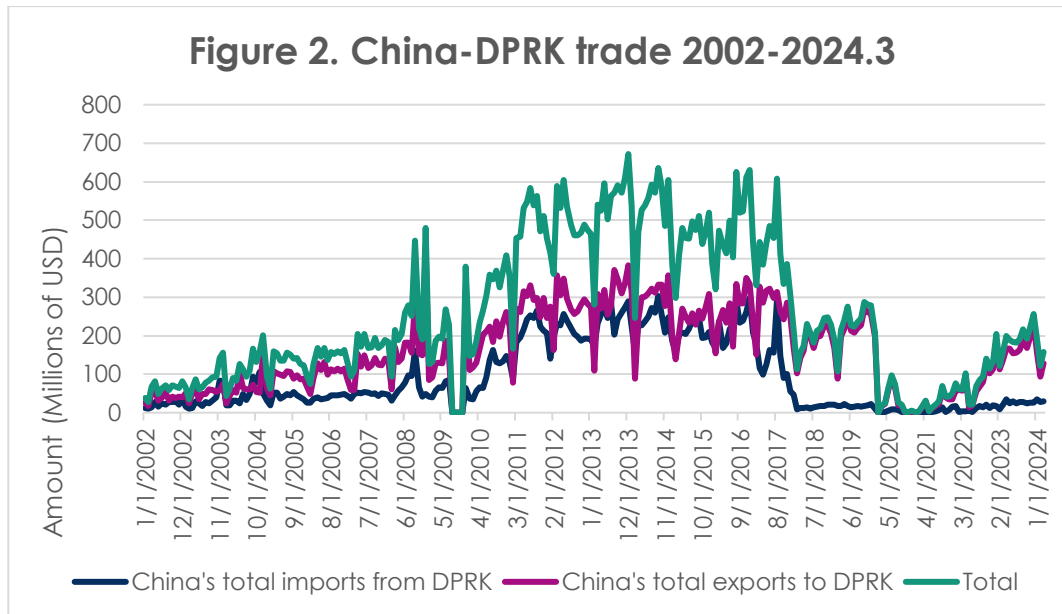
Yet they disagreed with successive U.S. administrations about the means through which this goal should be accomplished. They argued that the United States had the central responsibility for addressing the issue, that it should be addressed peacefully and that negotiations should proceed in a step-by-step fashion. There seemed to be some progress in this direction in the Six Party Talks. But when the Talks collapsed in 2008, Obama adopted the strategy of strategic patience under which the U.S. would put the onus for diplomatic progress on North Korea coming back to the negotiating table.

As Chinese diplomat [Fu Ying](#) wrote in a scathing critique in 2017, this approach was doomed to failure. If diplomacy was to resume, the U.S. would need to take the initiative. She was proven right.

The Six Party Talks imploded for several reasons, but prominent among them was Kim Jong Il's stroke in 2008 and the regime's subsequent preoccupation with engineering the political transition to his son Kim Jong-un. Thanks to Adam Cathcart at [Sino-NK](#) we have an incredibly detailed dossier on Chinese support for Kim Jong-un immediately following his father's death in December 2011. This trove of documents underlines that when China speaks of "stability" on the Korean peninsula it means not only strategic stability but political stability within North Korea itself. China has consistently opposed any measures that undermine the regime; at that most basic level, China and Russia are in fundamental alignment with the Kim dynasty. We might even call this "deep alignment."

Nonetheless, China-DPRK relations almost immediately fell into a freeze under Xi Jinping. This has been chalked up to short-term slights (North Korea conducted a nuclear test in 2013, between Xi's naming as General Secretary in November 2012 and his ascent to president in March 2013), to more fundamental interests, such as Beijing's interest in tending to China-ROK relations. In terms of metrics, Victor Cha's team at [Beyond Parallel](#) has put together data on high-level China-DPRK visits (defined as meetings at the level of Minister of Foreign Affairs and above). The falloff from 2012 until the summit era was precipitous. As Xian Wu and I traced, by 2016, China's change in tone with respect to North Korean sanctions was growing more apparent at the UN Security Council, where China started to support more vigorous sanctions.

By the time of the Trump-Xi Mar a Lago summit in April 2017, Xi Jinping was already willing to toughen multilateral sanctions on North Korea's commercial trade in order to secure a grand bargain with the Trump administration on trade policy. And that was even before North Korea conducted missile and nuclear tests in the second half of the year that came close to provoking a U.S. use of force. None of this was to China's liking. UNSC resolutions shifted from targeting North Korean imports related directly to its nuclear and missile programs to North Korea's commercial exports such as coal and iron ore. The economic effects were immediate and resulted in the near collapse of Chinese imports from the DPRK (Figure 2); these resolutions were to figure prominently in the breakdown of the Hanoi summit.



The Rise and Fall of Summitry and the Role of the Ukraine War

With the term ‘the summit era,’ I mean the complex set of bilateral meetings set in motion by the Moon Jae-in administration’s initiative of inviting the North Koreans to the Winter Olympics in 2018. That period is typically associated with the dramatic North-South and U.S.-DPRK summits in Singapore and Hanoi. Less remarked is the fact that the period also saw no fewer than five Kim-Xi summits in a two-year period (all in China) and the first Kim-Putin summit in April 2019 as well. Readouts from these summits were sparse and speculative. But, as much commentary at the time noted, there can be little question that they marked some kind of reset in China-DPRK relations. Although Chinese reasoning is opaque, an obvious explanation was concern that North Korea would strike agreements with the U.S. that would reduce its political centrality on the peninsula.

The collapse of the Hanoi summit in 2019 marked the end of the summit era and its promise for a revival of diplomacy around North Korea’s nuclear program. Joel Wit offers the most comprehensive account, but here is a summary. As tensions mounted in 2017, China and Russia had already issued a Joint Statement that criticized the American approach (or lack thereof). A draft China-Russia UN Security Council Resolution put forward in December 2019 (see here and here) again shows explicit China-Russia alignment over the way negotiations over denuclearization should proceed. The proposal followed the broad outlines of the deal that Kim Jong Un brought to Hanoi, including trading partial sanctions relief for steps to shut down Yongbyon.

When the Americans failed to get the deal done, North Korea again entered a moment of isolation. In the wake of the Chinese sanctions, the radical border closure during COVID, and the deep

disappointment and loss of face at Hanoi, North Korea turned away from any cooperation with the U.S. toward policies of survival. These policies were at the same time both staunchly self-reliant and bellicose, including the outline of an ambitious shopping list of military hardware. This new direction can be seen in the 2021 speech that Kim Jong Un gave before the Eighth Party Congress (for example, [here](#) and [here](#)). The speech also emphasized solidarity among “socialist countries”—in effect a plea—and a reversal of some of the implicit criticism of China’s reforms at the Seventh Party Congress.

With both China’s and Russia’s relations with the U.S. worsening, North Korea’s two historical patrons made their support for North Korea more explicit. In May 2022, they scuttled a U.S.-backed resolution around a North Korean ICBM launch, a test which had been expressly prohibited under prior UNSC resolutions. Meanwhile, the gradual opening of the China-North Korea border promised to revive—and effectively realign—DPRK-China economic relations. North Korea’s rapid response to the Ukraine war—visible in Pyongyang’s response to the very first UNGA resolutions on the war—set the stage for the deepening of the DPRK-Russia relationship, including the September 2023 summit at the Vostochny Cosmodrome and the June 2024 summit, where the new and expansive Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Treaty was signed. And in 2024, Russia drove the final nail into the coffin of the UNSC sanctions regime with its [veto](#) of a resolution to extend the work of the UN Panel of Experts on North Korea, a body which had done outstanding forensic work on sanctions evasion.

Conclusion

With the failure of Hanoi, the deterioration in U.S. relations with Russia and China and the Ukraine war, the DPRK’s relations with its two patrons have not only improved, but there may also be broader alignment among all three parties. Yet the history sketched here raises several points for further consideration.

- Alignment is only one possible outcome of intra-alliance diplomacy: those relations have also seen significant periods when entanglement and abandonment concerns have arisen. China has appeared somewhat more preoccupied with entanglement risks around the DPRK’s nuclear program and there is speculation that Beijing might have drawn a red line at a seventh nuclear test. Given the challenges the Ukraine war poses to Moscow, it may be less constrained in its support than China would be.
- To the extent that alignment has an economic dimension, measuring it requires close attention to underlying trade and investment. Political and economic measures may not align. For example, even as China was imposing sanctions, it sought to limit the damage to North Korea and to shield it from collapse; I called this “deep alignment” around the goal of political stability.



- Both China and Russia have at various points confronted North Korea’s intransigence with respect to economic reform and its bottomless appetite for aid. Discussions of “alignment” will necessarily involve discussions of “at what cost.” Despite the expansive nature of the DPRK alliance document and offers suggested at the summits, Russia will need to ask how “cooperation” with North Korea will be paid for. For now, artillery shells are the equivalent of printing money and are probably sustaining some kind of complex barter trade. But does Russia have the stomach—as China has—of financing significant bilateral trade deficits?
- Finally, there is an implicit pattern in this account, which is that the extent of alignment between China and Russia and the DPRK depends on all three countries’ relations with the West and its Asian allies. Kim Jong-Un’s expectations about the U.S. were dashed by the failure at Hanoi (although they could be revived were President Trump to attempt another Hail Mary). At present, Russia does not appear to care much about the wider implications of its relationship with North Korea, but we don’t know if there are untested red lines. China, by contrast, has had to straddle support for North Korea with objectives it may want to pursue with the U.S. and South Korea. Although the current conjuncture appears to put very little pressure on North Korea to change course, threading that needle could limit the extent of alignment with the DPRK in the future.