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Russia-North Korea Relations

Overview

Since 2022, the Russian Federation (Russia) and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK, or North Korea) have taken steps to formally strengthen their bilateral relationship. Russian President Vladimir Putin and DPRK leader Kim Jong-un held summits in the Russian Far East in September 2023 and in Pyongyang in June 2024 (**Figure 1**). In Pyongyang, Putin and Kim signed a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Treaty that includes a mutual military assistance clause. North Korea has supported Russia's military actions in Ukraine by providing thousands of shipping containers of munitions, supplying ballistic missiles, and deploying 10,000 or more troops to Russia to help expel Ukrainian forces from Russia's Kursk region. Experts assess that Russia could transfer advanced military technology to North Korea, if it has not done so already, that could increase the threat North Korea poses to the United States and its allies. The Russian government has taken steps to degrade the implementation of United Nations sanctions against North Korea.

The upgraded Russia-DPRK relationship has implications for issues of concern to Congress, including battlefield conditions in the war in Ukraine, the maintenance of sanctions against Russia and North Korea, and the strength of North Korea's military capabilities. Russian technology transfers, for example, could improve the ability of North Korean missiles to strike the U.S. homeland as well as U.S. allies in East Asia.

Since evidence of the expanded Russia-DPRK partnership emerged, the U.S. government has responded by publicly revealing evidence of weapons transfers, coordinating among selected allies and partners, and (under the Biden Administration) issuing new designations against individuals and entities that violate U.S. and/or United Nations Security Council (UNSC) sanctions. The United States also has worked with South Korea and Japan to bolster deterrence and expand allied efforts to counter North Korea's sanction evasion; the United States and 10 countries formed the new Multilateral Sanctions Monitoring Team (MSMT) to assess sanctions violations and evasions. Congress could review Administration policies, examine implementation of unilateral and multilateral sanctions, consider whether to explore ways to disrupt Russia-DPRK transactions that violate sanctions, and review the breadth and pace of Russia-DPRK cooperation as well as its impact on U.S. and allied forces.

Russia's Changing Approach to North Korea

From 2006 to 2017, Russia (along with China) supported the adoption of 10 UNSC sanctions resolutions targeting North Korea over its illicit nuclear weapons and missile programs. These resolutions restrict trade and engagement with North Korea. In particular, they prohibit weapons transfers to or from North Korea and assistance to North Korea's ballistic missile programs, including space or satellite launch activities, among other transactions. Russia

and China also participated in past talks seeking to persuade North Korea to denuclearize.

Since at least 2022, however, Russia has reversed course. During 2022 and 2023, Russia and China blocked U.S.-led efforts at the UNSC to adopt stricter sanctions on North Korea following DPRK ballistic missile tests. In March 2024, Russia voted against the renewal of a UN expert panel charged with monitoring sanctions implementation; the panel had documented North Korea's sanctions evasion, including ship-to-ship transfers of oil and coal in the waters off China's and Russia's coasts, since 2010. The Russian government may have forced dissolution of the panel to limit international monitoring of its banned trade and other activities with North Korea.

An Expanding Partnership

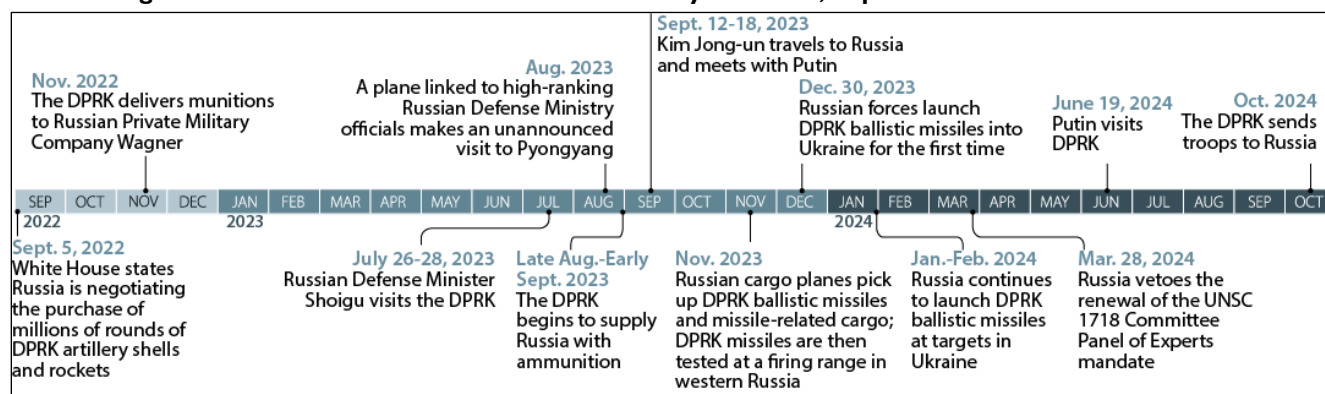
Russia-DPRK relations have improved since the late 2010s, in particular since Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. North Korea has supported Russia's actions against Ukraine, including its claim to have annexed Ukrainian territory, and reportedly began transferring munitions to Russia in 2022. Russia also has expanded its economic and diplomatic support for North Korea.

The Putin-Kim summits of 2023 and 2024 appear to have taken bilateral cooperation to new levels. Kim's 2023 weeklong trip to Russia's Far East was his first summit with any foreign leader since 2019. High-level Russian and DPRK officials subsequently have met in each other's capitals to develop the partnership in a broad range of areas including economics, science, technology, and culture.

Putin's June 2024 visit to Pyongyang appeared to restore elements of the Soviet Union-DPRK military alliance, which had lapsed following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Article 3 of the new Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Treaty calls for each side to "immediately provide military and other assistance by all of one's means available" in the event either side "is put in a state of war by an armed invasion." In October 2024, Putin said the treaty theoretically would provide legal validity for accepting DPRK troops. In the treaty, the two sides also pledged to expand cooperation in scientific fields, including nuclear energy and space technology.

Benefits for North Korea

According to the U.S. intelligence community's 2025 annual threat assessment (ATA), Russia is providing North Korea with "financial benefit[s], diplomatic support, and defense cooperation." Russia has been accused of shipping oil to North Korea above UNSC-permitted levels. Russia reportedly has unfrozen \$9 million in DPRK assets, is facilitating North Korea's access to the global financial system, and hosts DPRK workers in violation of UNSC sanctions. Russia has increased food exports to North Korea and may be paying North Korea for sending troops. Putin has said Russia might help North Korea build and perhaps launch satellites.

Figure 1. Timeline of North Korea-Russia Military Relations, September 2022 to October 2024

Source: Congressional Research Service.

Policymakers and analysts have raised concerns about the extent to which Russia-DPRK cooperation could enhance North Korea's military capabilities. North Korea may gain useful information about how its missile systems and its troops perform on the battlefield. According to the 2025 ATA, "Combat experience in the Russia-Ukraine war also could help Pyongyang strengthen its training and become more tactically proficient."

The U.S. Forces Korea Commander General Xavier Brunson said in April 2025 congressional testimony that "Russia is expanding sharing of space, nuclear, and missile-applicable technology, expertise, and materials to the DPRK." He further stated that "Russia's expanded cooperation will enable advancements of DPRK's weapons of mass destruction (WMD) program across the next three to five years." The May 2025 MSMT report also says that Russia "is believed to have provided North Korea with air defense equipment and anti-aircraft missiles, as well as advanced electronic warfare systems."

Upgrading relations with Russia could help North Korea reduce its dependence on China. Given North Korea's greater economic and other ties to China, however, there likely are limits to how far North Korea would go to wean itself from reliance on China, which may be uneasy with the new partnership between Russia and North Korea.

Benefits for Russia

Russia's most immediate benefit from upgrading ties to North Korea is its ready access to large stockpiles of ammunition. As of late 2024, Russia was firing an average of 10,000 artillery shells a day. To sustain this rate of fire while it increases its domestic production capacity, Russia has turned to North Korea for artillery ammunition and ballistic missiles. According to U.S. officials and observers, North Korea has supplied Russia with millions of artillery and rocket artillery ammunition. According to the May 2025 MSMT report, North Korea also supplied Russia with at least 100 ballistic missiles in 2024 that were "launched into Ukraine to destroy civilian infrastructure and terrorize populated areas."

In October 2024, Ukrainian officials alleged North Korea was committing more than 10,000 troops to aid Russia's war effort. The presence of DPRK troops in Russia was confirmed by both South Korean and U.S. officials (Russia and North Korea did not acknowledge their presence until April 2025). DPRK troops have been involved in combat

operations and reportedly suffered "heavy casualties." DPRK troops helped Russia expel Ukrainian forces from Russia's Kursk region in March 2025, with Russian President Putin calling DPRK troops "heroes" for their participation.

Russia may be strengthening ties with North Korea (as well as China and Iran) in part to compensate for its loss of access to Western markets and technology. The partnership also may be an attempt by Russia to reassert its role in the Asia-Pacific and regain leverage in its relationship with China by inserting itself as an actor in any negotiations or discussions regarding North Korea.

Issues for Congress

Congress has been at the forefront of efforts to impose and expand U.S. sanctions in response to North Korea's nuclear weapons and missile programs, human rights abuses, and other illicit activities. Congress has supported sanctions against Russia for Moscow's malign activities, including malicious influence operations, weapons proliferation, human rights abuses, and the invasion of Ukraine. Congress could assess the Trump Administration's efforts to monitor these activities and its implementation of the MSMT report's recommendations. Congress could review the Administration's use of sanctions against North Korea and Russia, as well as efforts to persuade other countries to enforce multilateral sanctions. S. 1883, introduced in May 2025, is aimed at requiring the executive branch to develop a strategy to disrupt growing cooperation among China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea.

Congress could consider examining the U.S. response to DPRK weapons and personnel transfers to Russia; whether (and, if so, how) such transfers may affect U.S. interests and allies in the region and elsewhere; and whether (and, if so, how) the growing relationship between North Korea and Russia may affect Ukraine's security and the effectiveness of U.S. security assistance to allies. More broadly, Congress could explore the potential impact of Russia's decision to stop implementing UNSC resolutions that sanction North Korea.

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