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Russia-North Korea Relations

Overview

Over the past two years, 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 eastern Russia in September 2023 and in Pyongyang in June 2024. In Pyongyang, Putin and Kim signed a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Treaty that includes a “mutual military assistance” clause. North Korea reportedly has provided Russia with thousands of shipping containers of munitions, which the Russian military is using in Ukraine. The Russian government has taken steps to erode the effectiveness of United Nations sanctions against North Korea. Experts assess that Russia could transfer advanced military technology to North Korea, if it has not done so already. 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, North Korea’s military capabilities and willingness to engage in provocative actions against the U.S. homeland as well as U.S. allies in East Asia, and those U.S. allies’ willingness to continue their half-century reliance on the U.S. nuclear deterrent instead of developing independent nuclear weapons capabilities.

To date, the Biden Administration has responded to the upgraded Russia-DPRK relationship by publicly revealing evidence of weapons transfers, coordinating condemnation from selected allies and partners, and issuing new unilateral designations against individuals and entities that violate U.S. and United Nations Security Council (UNSC) sanctions. The Administration also has worked with the governments of South Korea and Japan to increase deterrence and expand allied efforts to counter North Korea’s efforts to evade sanctions, such as a new U.S.-South Korea task force to disrupt DPRK illicit imports of petroleum. 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 North Korea-Russia 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 measures restrict trade and engagement with North Korea, and particularly prohibit weapons transfers 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 Pyongyang 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. A Russian UN representative said the panel was “losing its relevance” and sanctions should be reviewed. The Russian government may have forced dissolution of the panel to limit international monitoring of its banned trade and other activities with the DPRK.

An Expanding Partnership

Russia-DPRK relations have improved since the late 2010s, and in particular since Russia launched its full invasion of Ukraine in 2022. North Korea supported Russia’s actions, including its annexation of Ukrainian territory, and reportedly began transferring munitions to Russia in 2022. Russia 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. During Kim’s 2023 week-long trip to Russia’s Far East, he met with Putin and visited sites such as Russia’s newest spaceport, a factory producing advanced jets, and Russia’s Pacific Fleet in Vladivostok. It was Kim’s first summit with any foreign leader since 2019. High-level Russian and DPRK officials subsequently met in each other’s capitals to develop the partnership in a broad range of areas including economics, science, technology, and culture.

Putin’s 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.” The treaty requires such actions to be in accordance with Article 51 of the United Nations Charter, which recognizes the right to self-defense. It remains unclear at this point whether the wording may be primarily symbolic, allowing both sides freedom in how they interpret the treaty’s provisions. The treaty’s predecessor, signed in 2000, contained no such military intervention clause. The 2024 agreement also states that the two countries will cooperate in scientific fields, including peaceful nuclear energy and space technology. At this point, the treaty does not appear to have been ratified.

Benefits for North Korea

According to the U.S. intelligence community’s 2024 annual threat assessment (ATA), since at least Kim’s 2023 visit to Russia, Moscow has provided North Korea “diplomatic, economic, and military concessions” in exchange for weaponry. According to press reports, Putin

has said Russia is prepared to help North Korea build and perhaps launch satellites.

Figure 1. Timeline of DPRK-Russia Military Relations



Source: Congressional Research Service.

In addition to increasing exports of food to North Korea, in 2024, the Biden Administration and nongovernmental experts have accused Russia of shipping oil to North Korea above UNSC-permitted levels. Russia reportedly has unfrozen \$9 million in North Korean assets, is facilitating the DPRK's access to the global financial system, and hosts North Korea workers in violation of UNSC sanctions. U.S. National Security Council (NSC) spokesman John Kirby said in January 2024 that "in return for its support, we assess that Pyongyang is seeking military assistance from Russia, including fighter aircraft, surface-to-air missiles, ballistic missile production equipment or materials, and other advanced technologies."

In addition to earning hard currency and/or in-kind items from arms sales, North Korea may gain useful information from Russia about how its missile systems perform on the battlefield, potentially accelerating improvements in North Korea's ballistic missile capabilities. North Korea also has been advancing its nuclear weapons programs.

Policymakers and analysts have raised concerns about whether Russia-DPRK scientific cooperation may lead to more transfers of military technologies, prohibited items, or both that would improve North Korea's military capabilities, especially those related to satellites or missiles.

Upgrading its relationship with Russia could help North Korea reduce its dependence on China. Given the greater economic and other relationship to China, however, there likely are limits to how far Pyongyang could go toward weaning 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 the DPRK is ready access to large stockpiles of ammunition. According to a March 2024 estimate, Russia was 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 and ballistic missiles. According to a reported August 2024 South Korean government assessment, North Korea had sent more than 13,000 shipping containers to Russia, containing over 6 million rounds of ammunition. Russia also has "used upwards of 40 DPRK-produced ballistic missiles" against Ukrainian targets since late

December 2023, according to official U.S. statements. NSC spokesman Kirby has said that Russia has used DPRK weapons "to target Ukraine's civilian infrastructure and to kill innocent Ukrainian civilians."

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. By potentially stoking tensions on the Korean Peninsula, Putin also may use the Russia-DPRK strategic partnership to divert U.S. attention from Ukraine and pressure Western and Western-allied governments, including South Korea, not to directly provide Ukraine with lethal military equipment. Putin said after his visit to Pyongyang that Russia would not rule out sending weapons to North Korea. The partnership also may be a Russian attempt 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 Russia's malign activities, including, among others, malicious influence operations, election interference, human rights abuses, and invasion of Ukraine. 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. Congress could assess reporting requirements in place to monitor these activities—particularly in light of the termination of the UN panel of experts on North Korea—and exercise oversight of policies and implementation.

Congress could consider examining the U.S. response to DPRK transfers to Russia; whether (and, if so, how) such transfers may affect U.S. allies in the region and elsewhere; and whether (and, if so, how) the growing relationship between North Korea and Russia may affect Ukraine and the effectiveness of U.S. security assistance to allies. More broadly, Congress could explore the impact, if any, of Russia's decision to cease implementation of UNSC resolutions that sanction North Korea on North Korean trade and on the international system.

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