



Russia-North Korea Relations

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Overview

Since 2022, the Russian Federation (Russia) and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK, or North Korea) have expanded and deepened their relationship in ways that may erode U.S. security and interests. During that period, Russian President Vladimir Putin and DPRK leader Kim Jong-un have met three times. At a June 2024 summit in Pyongyang, Putin and Kim signed a [Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Treaty](#), later ratified by both parties, that includes a commitment to provide military assistance in the event of an external armed attack on either country. North Korea has supported Russia's military actions in Ukraine—[reportedly earning billions of dollars in the process](#)—by providing thousands of shipping containers of [munitions, supplying ballistic missiles](#), and deploying over [10,000 troops](#) to Russia to help expel Ukrainian forces from Russia's Kursk region in 2025. U.S. officials have [assessed](#) that by gaining combat experience and by receiving Russian advanced military technology, North Korea may pose a [greater threat](#) to the United States and its allies.

The Russia-DPRK relationship has implications for issues of concern to Congress, including battlefield conditions in Ukraine, the maintenance of sanctions against Russia and North Korea, and the strength of North Korea's military and cyber 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. Concurrent improvements in North Korea's relations with Russia and the People's Republic of China (PRC, or China), along with the strengthening of Russia-China relations and the expansion of Russia's [footprint](#) in the Indo-Pacific, compound the challenges to the United States.

After evidence of the expanded Russia-DPRK partnership first surfaced, the U.S. government responded by publicly revealing evidence of weapons transfers, coordinating among selected allies and partners, and issuing new designations against individuals and entities that violate U.S. and/or United Nations Security Council (UNSC) sanctions. The United States also worked with South Korea and Japan to bolster deterrence and [expand allied efforts](#) to counter North Korea's sanctions evasion; the United States and 10 countries formed the Multilateral Sanctions Monitoring Team (MSMT) in 2024 to [assess](#) sanctions violations and evasions. The second Trump Administration has continued the MSMT's work and has sanctioned Russia-based DPRK information technology groups and specialists involved in cyber activities.

Russia's Changing Approach to North Korea

From 2006 to 2017, Russia (along with China) supported the adoption of 10 UNSC sanctions [resolutions](#) responding to North Korea's illicit nuclear weapons and missile programs. These resolutions broadly restrict trade and engagement with North Korea, including a ban on imports of DPRK goods in a variety

of sectors. The UNSC resolutions 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](#). They also prohibit the use of North Korean labor. In addition to supporting these sanctions, Russia and China 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 vetoed a resolution that would have renewed the mandate of a UN expert panel charged with monitoring sanctions implementation (China abstained); the panel had [documented](#) North Korea's sanctions evasion since 2010, including ship-to-ship transfers of oil and coal in the waters off China and Russia's coasts. Moscow's veto of the panel may have been taken to limit international monitoring of Russia's banned trade and other activities with North Korea.

An Expanding Partnership

Russia-DPRK relations have improved dramatically since Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. That year, North Korea reportedly began [transferring munitions to Russia](#). Kim's 2023 meeting with Putin in Russia was his first summit with any foreign leader since 2019. 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 bilateral treaty [calls](#) for each side to "provide military and other assistance with all means in its possession without delay" in the event either side "is put in a state of war by an armed invasion." In the treaty, the two sides also pledged to expand cooperation in scientific fields, including nuclear energy and space technology. High-level Russian and DPRK officials subsequently have met in each other's capitals to develop their [partnership](#) in a range of areas including economics, science, technology, and culture. In 2026, the two countries opened their [first-ever road bridge](#) over their border.

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." According to [one estimate](#), through the end of 2025, North Korea earned between \$7.7 and \$14.4 billion from supporting Russia's war effort, primarily from artillery deliveries. Russia [has been accused](#) of shipping oil to North Korea above UNSC-permitted levels. Russia reportedly has [unfrozen](#) \$9 million in DPRK assets held in the Russian banking system, [is facilitating](#) North Korea's access to the global financial system, and [hosts DPRK workers](#) possibly in violation of UNSC sanctions. Russia also has increased food exports to

North Korea. Putin has [said](#) Russia might [help](#) North Korea build and [perhaps launch satellites](#).

Policymakers and analysts have raised [concerns](#) about the extent to which Russia-DPRK [cooperation](#) is enhancing North Korea's military and cyber capabilities. North Korea may have gained useful [information](#) about how its missile systems and its troops [perform](#) on the [battlefield](#). According to the 2026 [ATA](#), "The benefits that North Korea receives for its support for Russia in the war against Ukraine have increased North Korean capabilities. North Korean military forces have gained valuable combat experience in 21st Century warfare along with equipment." U.S. Forces Korea Commander General Xavier Brunson in 2026 [congressional testimony](#) said that North Korea has made "significant shifts" in its military capabilities as a result of its upgraded partnership with Russia. Indo-Pacific Commander Admiral Samuel Paparo [testified](#) to Congress in April 2026 that "North Korea continues to attempt to gain Russian assistance in developing space launch vehicles, military satellites, one-way attack drones, missile technology, and advanced submarine propulsion technology." The May 2025 [MSMT report](#) 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 may have spurred China, with which Pyongyang has more extensive ties, to focus attention on its own relationship with North Korea. After not meeting between 2020 and 2025, Kim and PRC President Xi Jinping have met twice since September 2025.

Benefits for Russia

Russia's most immediate benefit from upgrading ties with North Korea is its ready access to large stockpiles of [artillery ammunition](#), [ballistic missiles](#), and [soldiers](#) and [laborers](#), all of which have helped supplement Russian reserves and bolstered Russia's defense production. In October 2024, North Korea committed more than 10,000 troops to aid Russia's war effort. DPRK troops were involved in combat operations to help Russia expel Ukrainian forces from Russia's Kursk region in March 2025, with Russian President Putin calling DPRK troops "[heroes](#)" for their participation. A DPRK memorial built in 2026 for troops [killed in action](#) in Russia appears to list over 2,000 names. Ukrainian officials [reportedly estimate](#) that several thousand DPRK engineers and specialists are deployed supporting the Russian military, including reports of 400 drone operators. In August 2026, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky warned that North Korea would be deploying [30,000-50,000 troops](#) to Russia. Also in August 2026, Ukrainian intelligence [assessed](#) that plans are being finalized for DPRK to send a missile unit of 90 personnel and at least 120 KN-23 and KN-24 ballistic missiles. The DPRK KN-23 and KN-24 ballistic [missiles](#) may not be as accurate as equivalent Russian systems but have a long range and large payload and would provide increased capabilities to Russian forces given Ukraine's lack of [air defense interceptors](#).

In 2024 and 2025, Russia granted over 40,000 North Koreans education visas that are suspected of being used by Russian

firms to employ DPRK workers, possibly in violation of UNSC sanctions. Importing North Korean [workers](#) has helped Russia overcome a labor shortage and helped rebuild the Kursk region following the expulsion of Ukrainian forces in 2025.

Russia may be strengthening ties with North Korea (as well as China and Iran) [partly to compensate for its loss of access to Western markets and technology](#). The partnership also may reflect Russia's attempt to reassert its [role](#) in the Indo-Pacific region and regain leverage in its relationship with China by inserting itself as an actor in any negotiations or discussions regarding North Korea. In 2026, Admiral Paparo testified that increased mutual support among Russia, North Korea, and China creates an "[interconnected challenge to U.S. national security and regional stability](#)."

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 review the Administration's implementation 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, would require the executive branch to develop a strategy to disrupt growing cooperation among China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea. The Ukraine Support Act ([H.R. 2913](#)), which passed the House in June 2026, contains a reporting requirement and would expand sanctions on Russia-North Korea cooperation.

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. and allies' interests in Europe, the Indo-Pacific region, and elsewhere; and the extent to which ongoing Russia-DPRK cooperation affects Ukraine's security and the effectiveness of U.S. security assistance to allies. Congress also could assess possible effects of Russia's decision to halt implementation of UNSC resolutions on the Russian and North Korean economies.

The National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2026 (FY2026 NDAA; [P.L. 119-60](#)) requires an assessment of the impact of the Russia-North Korea alliance (§1241) and requires multiple agencies to establish, no later than 60 days after the law passed, working groups on "adversary alignment" among Russia, North Korea, China, and Iran (§1273). The working groups' findings and recommendations are to be compiled in a report outlining a "strategic approach" to "disrupt, frustrate, constrain, and prepare for" such cooperation, and the report is to be submitted to relevant congressional committees no later than 180 days after the working groups were established.

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