

Behind the Russia–North Korea Alliance

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Russian President Vladimir Putin and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un toast during a reception at the Mongnangwan Reception House in Pyongyang on June 19, 2024. Vladimir Smirnov/Pool/AFP via Getty Images



By Antonio Graceffo

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Commentary

North Korea's test-firing of banned missiles and deployment of troops to Ukraine are drawing unwanted attention to Beijing and risking secondary sanctions—an outcome the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and Xi Jinping hopes to avoid given China's struggling economy.

The recent BRICS Summit in Kazan, Russia, highlighted emerging tensions within the anti-Western alliance of China, Russia, North Korea, and Iran. During the event, Xi notably left Russian President Vladimir Putin waiting alone before a scheduled [photo session](#), standing in front of Russian and Chinese flags. This incident occurred as Putin aimed to demonstrate resilience against Western sanctions by

hosting the summit. Xi's actions appeared to underscore China's dominant position in their bilateral relationship. This display of hierarchy may be linked to Beijing's concerns over the strengthening ties between [Pyongyang and Moscow](#), which could undermine the CCP's influence over North Korea.

In recent developments, North Korea has deployed [approximately 1,000 soldiers](#) to Russia, with some already coming under fire from Ukrainian forces. The U.S. State Department anticipates that these troops may soon participate directly in the conflict in Ukraine. Earlier this year, Russia and North Korea enhanced their bilateral relations, with Pyongyang supplying [munitions to Moscow](#), actions that contravene a [United Nations arms embargo](#). China, serving as the primary economic supporter of both North Korea and Russia, is generally presumed to be consulted before either nation undertakes significant foreign policy actions. However, it remains uncertain whether the CCP approved North Korea's munitions sales to Russia or the subsequent strengthening of their military cooperation.

North Korea's deepening ties with Russia appear to be a strategic move to [lessen its dependence](#) on China, thereby reducing Beijing's influence over Pyongyang. This burgeoning partnership could enhance North Korea's nuclear weapons program, potentially through Russian support for its missile development. Additionally, North Korea may be seeking Russian military commitments in the event of a conflict on the Korean Peninsula. The 2024 [Russia–North Korea](#) mutual defense agreement suggests that, regardless of China's stance



on such a conflict, North Korea may anticipate Russian military assistance. North Korea is obviously hedging its alliance with China.

Since World War II, and especially after the collapse of the USSR, North Korea has had little choice but to maintain strong ties with China. This relationship has allowed the CCP to exert some control over Kim Jong Un's missile program, though Beijing **ultimately failed** to prevent North Korea from acquiring nuclear weapons—a development even the CCP likely saw as counter to its interests. Now, however, Moscow seems to be offering Pyongyang an alternative partner, and North Korea's growing alignment with Russia may be creating headaches for Xi and the CCP at an inconvenient time.

As Xi works to rebuild ties with Europe and the United States, North Korea's actions are drawing unwanted negative attention, including reminders of the Ukraine war—a conflict involving China's close ally, Russia. With China's economy stagnating, Xi has implemented a **record stimulus** that most experts believe will likely fail to rescue growth and only add to the **country's debt**. Amid these challenges, Xi is focused on attracting more foreign trade and investment—not provoking further sanctions.

Xi is keen on fostering more foreign trade and investment, not triggering sanctions. As a result, China has recently taken a more cautious stance on its support for Russia, unlike North Korea, which appears indifferent to sanctions. In late October, North Korea test-fired a **long-range missile**, defying the United Nations Security Council. North Korea is already **under extensive sanctions** and has little left to lose, but Xi and the CCP have much more at stake. While Russia and North Korea are largely decoupled from Western economies, China still relies heavily on trade and investment from the United States and the European Union. This dependence was underscored in October when the United States imposed **sanctions on China** for its indirect support of Russia's war in Ukraine.

North Korea's increasing autonomy is proving to be a strategic headache for Beijing, undermining Xi's efforts to stabilize China's economy and global standing. North Korean troops' engagement in Ukraine marks a historic moment—it would be the first time in more

than 70 years that North Koreans have killed Europeans. Although Ukraine isn't part of NATO, it is part of Europe, and the optics are troubling: two of China's closest allies, North Korea and Russia, are now involved in killing Europeans.

This development could accelerate discussions around an "Asian NATO," as North Korea's actions may be seen as justification for such a coalition. Historically, European nations—aside from France and Britain—have been hesitant to support U.S.-led militarization in the Indo-Pacific, viewing their stake in the region as limited. However, with an Indo-Pacific nation now directly involved in the conflict on European soil, that calculus could shift. For Xi, further European militarization in the Indo-Pacific would be deeply unwelcome, especially at a time when the CCP is eager to avoid additional sanctions and encourage foreign investment in China.

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Antonio Graceffo

Author

Antonio Graceffo, Ph.D., is a China economic analyst who has spent more than 20 years in Asia. Graceffo is a graduate of the Shanghai University of Sport, holds a China-MBA from Shanghai Jiaotong University, and currently studies national defense at American Military University. He is the author of "Beyond the Belt and Road: China's Global Economic Expansion" (2019).

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