

The Potential for Russia to Supercharge North Korea's Nuclear and Missile Program

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

North Korea is fast becoming a weapons supplier of choice for malign actors worldwide and almost certainly sees opportunity in a closer relationship with Russia.

Such a closer relationship could well include technical assistance with Pyongyang's missile and nuclear weapons programs.

Washington, Seoul, and Japan must forge a partnership that fields capable militaries that will not be coerced even by a confident, nuclear-armed North Korea.

Introduction

Over the past two and a half years, the Russian–North Korean relationship has changed fundamentally. Vladimir Putin and Kim Jong Un have increasingly leveraged the other country's strengths to overcome their nation's own weaknesses. Russia has found a partner willing to provide munitions for use in the Ukraine war, and North Korea has received food and currency aid, and perhaps most importantly, potentially technical assistance with their missile and nuclear programs.

If it is true that Russia is providing North Korea with technical assistance for its missile and nuclear weapons programs, it is reasonable to ask:

- What are the implications of such an arrangement?

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- What does such an arrangement mean for the United States, South Korea, and Japan?
- What are the longer-term consequences of a deeper relationship between Russia and North Korea beyond the current levels of support, and how might the partnership evolve?

This paper will examine the history of Russian–North Korean cooperation, the current state of that cooperation, the potential for Russian technical assistance with North Korean missile and nuclear programs, and their implications for the United States.

History of Russian–North Korean Post–Cold War Cooperation

The partnership between Moscow and Pyongyang goes back decades to the 1961 Soviet–North Korean Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Assistance,¹ which underpinned their cooperation during the Cold War.

Following the end of the Cold War, Moscow sought to maintain a strategy of diplomatic equidistance between Seoul and Pyongyang. Part of this equidistance manifested as Russia attempted to cast itself in the role of an honest broker between Seoul and Pyongyang during the six-party denuclearization talks of the 2000s.² In the mid-2000s, Moscow believed it had a real opportunity to serve as an intermediary between Pyongyang on one side and Seoul and Washington on the other and thereby increase its relevance to the security of the Korean Peninsula.³ However, the ultimate collapse of the Six Party Talks by the end of the 2000s was a true diplomatic setback for Moscow because it demonstrated Russia’s limits as an objective mediator in multilateral settings.⁴ Correspondingly, Moscow’s ability to influence the broader security issues surrounding the Korean Peninsula degraded, and its influence and relationship with Seoul deteriorated slowly but steadily.

At the same time, Russian perceptions of the potential threat posed by North Korea increased. In June 2009, President Dmitry Medvedev deployed a Russian S-400 air defense system to Russia’s border with North Korea following concerns about North Korean instability during the period associated with the rise of Kim Jung-Un and the maturation of North Korea’s nuclear weapons program.⁵

The 2010s were a period of further transition within Moscow. Some in Moscow favored a return to strategic balancing between Seoul and Pyongyang, but such balancing became an increasingly untenable position. By the

mid to late 2010s, it seemed that Moscow had to choose between favoring Pyongyang or favoring Seoul. During this period, Medvedev, now serving as Prime Minister, expressed growing concern over North Korea's nuclear program and hinted that Russia might need to isolate North Korea as a way to limit or roll back its nuclear program.⁶ Medvedev's seeming willingness to isolate North Korea because of its nuclear program proved to be polarizing.⁷ While many feared that the a nuclear-armed North Korea could trigger a nuclear war within the region, the consequences of which Russia would be hard-pressed to avoid, others counseled engagement with Pyongyang and saw an opportunity to partner with North Korea on humanitarian issues as a way to reopen dialogue on denuclearization.⁸

By the end of the 2010s, Russia was moving ever closer to North Korea, as evidenced by its increasing trade with North Korea and a seeming willingness to write off economic debt.⁹ Russia reduced its diplomatic activity on the Korean Peninsula as it followed Chinese diplomatic leads and efforts in public statements and in the United Nations, giving tacit and then explicit vocal support to Pyongyang.¹⁰ As a consequence, relations between Pyongyang and Moscow improved as they slowly moved closer to one another diplomatically, a development that was slowed only by the COVID pandemic.¹¹

Russian–Korean Relations in the 2020s

By the early 2020s, relationship trends among Moscow, Pyongyang, and Seoul began to accelerate, with the end of the COVID pandemic coinciding with the Russian invasion of Ukraine. During this period, relations between Moscow and Pyongyang improved as those between Moscow and Seoul degraded further. By 2023, North Korea was providing Russia with munitions that it could use in its aggressive war with Ukraine, and South Korea was becoming an increasingly important supplier of munitions to Europe, which was restocking its supplies of munitions in the face of Russian threats to European security.¹²

In many ways, the war in Ukraine was a catalyst for relationships on the Korean Peninsula. As Russia desperately needed munitions, particularly artillery rounds and ballistic missiles, for use on the battlefields of Ukraine, North Korea's role as a supplier of weapons to Moscow increased the importance of the Moscow–Pyongyang relationship. And as South Korea became an ever more important supplier of munitions to NATO—thereby enabling NATO member states to supply additional weapons to Ukraine—the relationship between Moscow and Seoul degraded.¹³

In June 2024, Russian President Vladimir Putin travelled to Pyongyang for a summit with Kim Jong Un. Putin's visit followed a September 2023 trip to Russia by Kim that was almost certainly a meeting designed to secure munitions for Moscow and set the stage for the establishment of a more enduring relationship. The June 2024 trip was Putin's first visit to Pyongyang since 2000. During this visit, the two parties signed a comprehensive "strategic partnership," the terms of which included a vow of mutual aid if either country was attacked.¹⁴ Although this has been portrayed as a "mutual defense treaty," the terms of the agreement stop short of the terms that would be found in a formalized defense treaty akin to what exists between the United States and South Korea. This is not to say that the strategic partnership between Putin and Kim is unimportant, but it is an interim step.

During the June 2024 summit, both leaders formally agreed to expand their exchanges of munitions for food and technical assistance.¹⁵ This announcement was seen by American, South Korean, and Japanese officials as "incredibly concerning" and indicated a solidification of the new relationship between Moscow and Pyongyang.¹⁶

During this same period, Russian warnings to South Korea regarding the potential direct sale of arms to Ukraine—arms that Ukraine could use to defend itself from Russian aggression—has further strained ties between Moscow and Seoul.¹⁷ Combined with North Korea's 2024 designation of South Korea as its "principal enemy,"¹⁸ as well as Russia's increased diplomatic support to North Korea, which has alienated South Korean policymakers, it is fair to assume that Russian–South Korean relations are at their post–Cold War worst. In fact, it is very possible that Russia has already returned to the Cold War dynamic of explicitly and unapologetically favoring Pyongyang over Seoul and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future.¹⁹

The consequence of all this is that Russia currently enjoys little leverage over South Korea and has few reasons to collaborate with it.²⁰ As Russia deepens its ties with North Korea, it will continue to lose leverage with South Korea, which will in turn reduce the disincentives for working with North Korea. This could well create a self-reinforcing dynamic that eventually results in two cohesive blocs on the Korean Peninsula with little meaningful relationship between them.

This dynamic is already evident. In South Korea's response to Putin's June 2024 visit to Kim, for example, officials hinted that, in view of the developing relationship between North Korea and Russia, they might openly supply Ukraine with munitions.²¹ Russia responded that such support "would definitely ruin" Russian–South Korean ties and could lead

to the expansion of Russian–North Korean military ties.²² During this announcement, Putin even hinted that South Korea could become the target of potential military strikes if it sustained arms transfers to European states, to include Ukraine.²³

North Korea’s Military Exports

For decades, North Korea has sold military equipment to some of the world’s most unsavory actors, including Libya, the Palestine Liberation Organization, Zimbabwe, Sudan, Yemen, Hamas, and Hezbollah.²⁴ Such exports proved to be an important source of hard currency that enabled the North Korean regime to maintain power on the peninsula. Over the past two decades, North Korea has expanded such exports and has become the arsenal of autocracies around the world. North Korea now counts China, Iran, Russia, and Syria among its most important trading and diplomatic partners. It is therefore not surprising that when Russia needed munitions to fuel its invasion of Ukraine, North Korea was willing to provide such weapons.²⁵

By 2023, it had become clear that North Korean munitions were showing up in Russia by the tens of thousands. In February 2024, South Korean officials asserted that North Korean support to the Russian military has been large-scale and has included 6,700 containers of military equipment, which could accommodate more than 3 million rounds of 152 mm artillery shells or more than 500,000 rounds of 122 mm multiple rocket launchers.²⁶ Such weapons may be produced by the roughly 300 military factories in North Korea that produce a variety of munitions.²⁷ Additional evidence suggests that North Korea is expanding its military production lines so that it can increase its arms sales to Russia and potentially to other countries as well.²⁸ There is also some evidence that the number of rounds North Korea has provided to Russia for use in Ukraine is well over 5 million.²⁹ Such support goes not only to Russian armed forces, but also to the private military contractors employed by Russia, including the Wagner Group.³⁰

North Korea also could be providing Russia with large amounts of antiquated but still effective multiple rocket launchers, antitank and anti-aircraft missiles, short-range ballistic missiles, tank artillery rounds, and field artillery pieces.³¹ In a sense, this would be a strategy of compensating for a lack of modern, high-quality weapons with large quantities of antiquated, low-quality systems from North Korea. There is strong evidence of the low quality of North Korean munitions, including reports that the munitions

North Korea has provided do not operate at high levels of effectiveness. By some estimates, only half of the munitions provided by North Korea work according to military requirements; the other half end up as “duds” in some shape or composition.³²

What North Korea Receives from Russia—and Could Receive

What, then, does North Korea get from Russia in exchange for its munitions? To begin with, Russia is almost certainly supplying hard currency, which North Korea needs. With little to offer for legitimate trade, North Korea’s illicit weapons allow it to acquire hard currency that it can then funnel into its own weapons programs and, most critically, use to help the Kim regime to maintain control of North Korea. This trade of weapons for cash further allows the Kim regime to expand its relationship with existing trading partners, seek new clients that it can support through expanded production lines, and gain access to restricted technologies. Part of the recent Kim Jong Un–Vladimir Putin summit occurred at a Russian spaceport,³³ where Putin strongly suggested that there would be ever greater North Korean–Russian military cooperation and said that Kim showed a “big interest in rocket technologies.”³⁴

In addition to the hard currency, there is some evidence that Russia is providing raw materials and food support to North Korea, thereby enabling greater munitions production.³⁵ Some reports suggest that Russia is providing thousands of tons of corn and wheat as part of a package of support for the regime.³⁶ Much of this support would align with North Korea’s long-standing “second-economy,” whereby illicit transfers of weapons and capabilities in exchange for currency and food aid prop up the Kim regime through channels that lie outside normal, global trade markets, which in many ways are cut off because of sanctions against North Korea.³⁷

Another benefit for North Korea is diplomatic support in the United Nations and beyond as both Russia and North Korea seek not only to evade existing sanctions and produce “sanctions-proof trade” relationships, but also to provide mutual support in various international venues with the explicit goal of undermining existing sanctions.³⁸ As one author has noted, “[t]he current China-Russia-DPRK trajectory, particularly as evidenced by Russia’s Panel of Experts veto at the UN Security Council and the Chinese abstention, indicates that coordinated operations to undermine the status quo in Northeast Asia are already well underway.”³⁹

One of the consequences of Kim's newfound access to hard currency and diplomatic support is that North Korea may no longer want or even need improved relations with the United States, which it may well view as a power in decline while the autocrats in Beijing, Moscow, and Pyongyang are on the rise. An additional consequence could be a modernized military, particularly more modern military hardware. Pyongyang almost certainly would like to upgrade its conventional military capabilities, which have languished since the end of the Cold War. In many ways, North Korea's conventional military equipment is a relic of a bygone era. Logically, therefore, Pyongyang would seek more modern fighter aircraft, surface-to-air missiles, and armored vehicles, as well as missile production capabilities, in exchange for rockets, missiles, and mortars.

Put another way, Pyongyang may be seeking to exchange older equipment in the short term for more modern (and more effective) Russian equipment in the longer term. Such a quid pro quo with Russia providing more modern military equipment to North Korea is of particular importance, as North Korea is almost certainly unable to match or even keep from falling behind American and South Korean military equipment on its own. As one analyst has written:

There is no realistic way for North Korea to close the widening gap in modern warfighting capabilities with its opponents on its own. It has neither financial nor technological resources to catch up even to ROK's conventional capabilities, let alone those of the US and Japan. The only way to redress the increasingly precarious balance of military power is to look for strategic allies, ending the three decades of strategic solitude. That's where Russia comes in. Moscow may become a source of some critical weapons and technologies, such as reconnaissance satellites and fighter jets, where North Korea's gap with the South is especially glaring.⁴⁰

If the relationship between Russia and North Korea continues to progress, the two parties conceivably could sign a formalized mutual defense treaty. Such a treaty could well strengthen military and security cooperation between Moscow and Pyongyang and lay the foundation for long-term military cooperation beyond mere arms trades.⁴¹ Such longer-term military cooperation that resulted from a mutual defense treaty could include joint military drills and exercises, potentially on the peninsula itself.⁴²

In this way, the Cold War relationship of Beijing as the military guarantor of North Korea and Moscow as the economic guarantor of North Korea could be flipped: "China will stay on as Pyongyang's primary economic

benefactor and diplomatic protector, while Russia could play the part of the North's main military partner. Moscow will be happy with such a role if only because it already has little to lose with Washington, Seoul and Tokyo."⁴³

Potential for Russia to Supercharge North Korea's Nuclear and Missile Programs

Of primary concern for the United States and South Korea is the likelihood that Russia could assist North Korea in developing the technologies it needs to advance its missile programs and nuclear warhead efforts. Specifically, there is concern that North Korea could receive technologies that would enable it to (1) launch large quantities of maneuverable cruise missiles to overwhelm U.S. and South Korean missile defenses, (2) miniaturize nuclear warheads to go on its ballistic or cruise missile inventory, and thereby (3) field capabilities to target locations at a variety of ranges with accuracy and high rates of effectiveness by advancing its intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) and submarine-launched ballistic missile (SLBM) programs.

Maneuverable Cruise Missiles. It is very possible that Russian assistance could take the form of helping North Korea to develop and produce a new generation of maneuverable cruise missiles. In particular, it is possible that Russia could provide assistance for the development of the next generation of the Hwasal family of "strategic" land-attack cruise missiles (LACMs). The North Koreans tested the Hwasal-2 in 2023 and described it as being capable of carrying "tactical nuclear weapons."⁴⁴ The LACM is a type of missile that, while capable of carrying small nuclear warheads, also has a small size and can maneuver at low altitudes. Such capabilities augment North Korea's ability to target South Korea and the United States with ballistic missiles.

Russia could help North Korea to mature its Hwasal family of LACMs by increasing the system's range, speed, accuracy, and maneuverability. The Russian SS-N-30A (Kalibr), an LACM used extensively by Russia during the war in Ukraine, could be a useful source of technology for the North Koreans, as it can be launched from a surface ship or a submarine or modified to be a ground-launched system and has a claimed range of over 4,000 km.⁴⁵ Alternatively, Russia could transfer technology from existing SSC-8 ground-launched cruise missiles (the system that triggered the American withdrawal from the Intermediate Nuclear Forces Treaty).⁴⁶

In either case, Russia's extensive and decades-long history of building effective and reliable missiles capable of carrying nuclear weapons could

help North Korea to modernize its Hwasal family of missiles, which currently has an estimated range of only 1,500–2,000 km.⁴⁷ A North Korean version of the Kalibr could be an additional, highly effective means of hitting targets in South Korea and Japan with a nuclear weapon.

Without question, South Korean and American missile defenses have matured in recent years with the deployment of THAAD to the region as well as with South Korea's own indigenous missile defenses. The ability to overwhelm these defenses depends in part on North Korea's ability to launch large salvos of mixed ballistic and cruise missiles, which means that sheer quantities of missiles are useful, but more modern, accurate, and potentially maneuverable cruise missiles could also go far toward overcoming missile defenses stationed in South Korea. Consequently, Russian assistance could enable North Korea at least to make it harder for Seoul and Washington to limit North Korea's ability to hit targets in the region with a nuclear weapon. This would require that the United States put more emphasis on the threat of retaliation to deter a North Korean nuclear attack.

Warhead Miniaturization. The ability to miniaturize nuclear warheads so that they may be carried by North Korean cruise or ballistic missiles is another critical concern. To date, there has been modest evidence that North Korea has mastered the high degree of technical sophistication needed to miniaturize nuclear weapons to the point where they could fit on a missile—a breakthrough achieved by Russia decades ago.

This is not to say that there is no evidence of North Korean warhead miniaturization. According to two senior U.S. military commanders, General William Gortney and Admiral Cecil Haney, there is some evidence that North Korea may have the ability to miniaturize a nuclear weapon to the point at which it could be loaded onto a rocket or missile capable of hitting a number of targets in East Asia and potentially in North America.⁴⁸ Until there is a test or an inspection or some other, more recent public declaration by a U.S. figure in authority, the national security community should maintain that it is possible—albeit not proven—that North Korea may have the ability to miniaturize a nuclear warhead for placement on a missile.

In recent years, Russia has invested heavily in producing miniaturized warheads capable of going onto cruise missiles, modernized ballistic missiles, and hypersonic boost glide vehicles such as the Avangard.⁴⁹ In addition, Russia's deployment of the SSC-8 land attack cruise missile in the past decade is quite troubling and ultimately triggered the U.S. withdrawal from the Intermediate Nuclear Forces Treaty. The SSC-8 cruise missile, which can be fired from mobile launchers with each launcher able to carry six missiles, can carry a highly sophisticated miniaturized warhead.

If Russia were to supply North Korea with the technology to develop and build a highly miniaturized warhead akin to what is carried on the SSC-8, the long-term implications for the security of both Northeast Asia and North America would be significant:

By itself, North Korea now has the theoretical capacity to attempt to simultaneously deter the US with ICBMs—a capability Pyongyang continues to refine through continued missile and satellite launches—while compelling South Korea with shorter-range ballistic missiles and tactical nuclear weapons. All that is missing is a transformative change in the international order capable of creating a disruption to the US–ROK alliance—a strategic inflection point that would alter the status quo of international relations. This is where China and Russia come in. Together, the three nuclear-armed countries produce an asymmetric nuclear capability—strategic depth creating a potentially dominant position in a tit-for-tat escalation spiral—that could stretch US hub and spoke extended deterrence commitments with the ROK and Japan.⁵⁰

Although North Korea has tested and fielded increasingly reliable and accurate cruise and ballistic missiles in recent years, there is only modest evidence that it has succeeded in miniaturizing nuclear warheads to the point at which they could fit on top of ballistic or cruise missiles.

Russia is ideally situated to aid North Korea in this endeavor, which would be the “crown jewel” of technology assistance that it could provide in exchange for North Korean munitions. Technically difficult, miniaturization that enabled Pyongyang to put a nuclear warhead on a modern cruise missile or multiple warheads on an ICBM would be what North Korea most desires from Russia, and Russia might not hesitate to transfer a technology it mastered decades ago in exchange for continued North Korean support in the Ukraine war.

If North Korea did receive this technical know-how from Russia, the security situation in Northeast Asia would change fundamentally because North Korea would be able to target sites across East Asia and North America with salvos of nuclear-tipped cruise and ballistic missiles. Such salvos—if initiated—would likely come after large numbers of cheap, conventionally armed ballistic and cruise missiles were fired at targets in South Korea, Japan, and the United States to overwhelm and exhaust allied missile defenses. Once these missile defenses were exhausted, combined salvos of nuclear-armed high-speed ballistic missiles and low-altitude maneuverable cruise missiles could target—and likely hit—key sites.

In this event, the deterrence dynamic would shift from one that is centered on deterrence by denial (through missile defenses that can intercept and destroy incoming missile threats) to one this centered on deterrence by punishment (through offensive weapons capable of causing widespread destruction in North Korea). Such a dynamic in Northeast Asia might not be as stable as the one that exists today—which could mean that crises involving North Korea could escalate more rapidly and in more unforeseen ways than is the case today.

ICBM and SLBM Assistance. North Korea has been advancing its ICBM force in recent years. In 2017, Pyongyang demonstrated that its Hwasong-14 and Hwasong-15 missiles could range the continental United States. In 2020, North Korea revealed the massive Hwasong-17 missile, which is assessed to have the ability to carry three to four nuclear warheads.

In 2023, North Korea tested the Hwasong-18, a solid-fuel, road-mobile ballistic missile capable of hitting targets in North America. The Hwasong-18 is a three-stage missile and large enough to carry multiple independent reentry vehicles (MIRVs), to include nuclear warheads.⁵¹ Over the past several months, it has become clear that the Hwasong-18 is a capable delivery vehicle that would create real dilemmas for the United States and South Korea. A road-mobile, solid-fuel missile gives North Korea a second strike capability that can be launched with little warning and few support vehicles, making it easy to conceal and highly reliable. It is a significant step and may become the backbone of North Korea's strategic deterrent. North Korea's continued production of ICBMs risks overwhelming the limited number of U.S. missile interceptors protecting the American homeland.

Russia could provide North Korea with additional technical assistance to build larger versions of the Hwasong missile, one that potentially can carry up to eight nuclear warheads to targets virtually anywhere in the Northern Hemisphere. If Russia does assist North Korea in building heavy, large-payload ICBMs, North Korea could credibly threaten the United States with large-scale attack, thus escalating any crisis or conflict almost from the outset.

Some U.S. officials have speculated that Moscow could also provide North Korea with the technical know-how to build nuclear-capable submarines—a capability that Kim Jung-Un has sought for over a decade.⁵² There is some precedent for technology-sharing when it comes to submarines and ballistic missiles. North Korea's *Hero Kim Gun-ok* submarine, launched in 2023, is a refurbished Soviet *Romeo*-class submarine capable of launching 10 ballistic missiles.⁵³ It is possible that Russia could assist North Korea in building or fielding additional missile submarines that could launch nuclear-armed cruise or ballistic missiles.

Technical Assistance Already Manifesting? One must wonder whether North Korea is already benefiting from Russian technical assistance. For example:

- In December 2023, North Korea conducted its most successful test of the Hwasong-18 when it fired a missile that reached a height of 6,000 km.⁵⁴
- In January 2024, North Korea claimed to have flight-tested a solid-fuel intermediate-range missile tipped with a hypersonic missile.⁵⁵
- Three months later, North Korea claimed to have tested a solid-fuel, hypersonic intermediate-range missile capable of evading South Korean and American missile defenses.⁵⁶
- In June 2024, North Korea launched a solid-fuel intermediate-range ballistic missile that it claimed included multiple independently targetable warheads.⁵⁷

The tempo and maturity of these tests, which seem to be taking place with significant frequency and demonstrate rapid technological advancements, suggest that North Korea may already have received technical assistance from Russia and is attempting to telegraph that it is now a more capable and lethal adversary. However, even if this is the case, the time interval between the September 2023 Kim–Putin meetings and the early 2024 missile tests is so short as to call into question whether or not Pyongyang had sufficient time to incorporate new technology into its missile systems.

Nevertheless, policymakers and defense planners in Seoul and Washington should assume that Russian–North Korean collaboration and mutual assistance will become a feature of the future security environment. Moreover, it is possible that other actors—a potential “Axis of Authoritarians”—could supply North Korea with similar capabilities. It has been reported, for example, that North Korea is receiving the same Iranian drones that Russia is employing in Ukraine.⁵⁸ In this sense, we could see North Korea, Russia, and Iran supporting one another’s defense industries, technology advancement, and procurement as a means to counter what they see as their primary threats: the United States and its allies in the Pacific, Europe, and the Middle East.

In addition, one cannot dismiss the role that China may play in such a dynamic. In many ways, North Korea exists at the sufferance of Beijing.

Troublesome at times, North Korea nevertheless serves as a useful distraction and threat to American interests in Northeast Asia—to the benefit of China. If China sees benefit in supporting or expanding technology transfers to North Korea, either directly or indirectly through its partners in Iran and Russia, then the United States and its allies need to be prepared for a further degradation of the regional security environment.

Implications of a Close North Korea–Russia Partnership

A North Korea that joins a new Axis of Authoritarians would be a potentially long-standing and serious challenge for the United States, South Korea, and Japan. It would be an axis that sought to overturn the long-standing Western consensus and international system and would actively undermine strategic stability. All three states seem to have revanchist ambitions and could coordinate their actions accordingly.⁵⁹ They also share the same objective of reshaping the international system, which they see as dominated by Western rules and values and rigged in favor of the United States and its allies. It is entirely possible that an emboldened Axis of Authoritarians would seek, as part of an effort to overturn the U.S.-led world order, a new security architecture in Northeast Asia—one that sought to decouple the United States from its allies in South Korea and Japan or even upend the 1953 Armistice Agreement itself.

North Korea's behavior could change significantly. Armed with the technologies necessary to build more accurate, modern, maneuverable, and capable cruise and ballistic missiles and the technology to put warheads on such missiles, Pyongyang might well believe that it could engage in provocations or even acts of aggression without fear of any significant American or South Korean response. According to this logic (flawed or not), Washington and Seoul would be deterred from responding or engaging in counter-provocations for fear of eliciting a nuclear response from North Korea.

Again, whether or not the United States or South Korea would be deterred by a more capable, nuclear-armed North Korea is almost beside the point: North Korea would almost assuredly feel emboldened by a nuclear arsenal that was supercharged and, to its thinking, therefore far more capable and intimidating. This could manifest itself not only in the greater use of coercive threats to South Korea, the United States, and Japan, but also in a more confident Russia, which might believe that a nuclear-capable North Korea could tie up the United States in the East, giving Moscow more freedom of action in Europe.

If North Korea was able to capitalize on Russian technical assistance and increased amounts of hard currency, it could also seek Russia's assistance in modernizing its conventional forces, particularly its artillery, fighters, air defenses, tanks, and conventional missile forces. There is some indication that North Korea is already requesting Russian assistance in repairing existing conventional forces or replacing them with more modern systems.⁶⁰ Such a modernized conventional force would create more regional security challenges for the United States and South Korea and make future crises with North Korea more dangerous. Moreover, a more confident North Korea would be less likely to engage in talks on stability or denuclearization with the West and thus would pose an even greater risk of provocation. In such scenarios, Kim might miscalculate, overplay his hand, and trigger a larger regional war that no party wants but all parties would be unable to avoid because of a Kim Jung-Un who is emboldened to the point of recklessness.

What the U.S., South Korea, and Japan Should Do

What, then, should Washington, Seoul, and Japan do in light of such a potential partnership between Moscow and Pyongyang? They must forge a strong, committed, and unified partnership that fields credible and capable militaries that will not be coerced even by a confident, nuclear-armed North Korea. Such a development would require a number of things. Specifically:

- The trilateral relationship should be expanded to include more military command and control integration and interoperability of capabilities among their fielded forces.
- Such a partnership should include trilateral or multilateral military exercises that both make the respective forces of the three nations more capable and present a force that can respond to any threat posed by North Korea.
- The three nations should engage in more data sharing and further integration of missile defenses, to include “left of launch” data sharing.⁶¹

Beyond military capabilities, Washington, Seoul, and Tokyo must ensure that the North Korean economy is stifled so as to contain further military development. Weak international enforcement of sanctions, including by successive U.S. Administrations, has undermined efforts to curtail North Korea's development of nuclear weapons and missiles. Such efforts will

become even more difficult as China and Russia now block additional U.N. resolutions to punish North Korean violations in addition to engaging covertly in commerce that weakens the impact of Western and international sanctions on the North Korean economy. Stronger enforcement of existing U.N. resolutions will be necessary to contain a more capable and confident (and therefore more aggressive) Pyongyang.

Conclusion

North Korea is fast becoming a weapons supplier of choice for malign actors around the world and almost certainly sees opportunity in a closer relationship with Russia. Such a closer relationship undoubtedly includes hard currency, food, and raw materials in exchange for North Korean weapons, but it could also include technical assistance with Pyongyang's missile and nuclear weapons programs. A more modern North Korea would almost certainly be emboldened and far more aggressive.

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