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**RUSSO-NORTH KOREAN MILITARY  
COOPERATION – A STRATEGIC  
PARTNERSHIP REBORN?**

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## Introduction

From 13 to 17 September 2023, Kim Jong-un embarked on his first visit to a foreign leader in over four years as he travelled to the Russian Far East to meet Vladimir Putin. This meeting symbolised a convergence of interests in opposing the U.S.-led Western order from which both countries find themselves increasingly isolated. Hence, although the summit did not produce an explicit statement of what was discussed or agreed on at the surface level, the meeting sparked fears of a potential arms deal between the two countries, which could well contribute to revitalising Putin's war machine in Ukraine (Ye Hee Lee & Bolton, 2023).

On the first day of the summit, Putin and Kim Jong-un met at the Russian spaceport of Vostochny Cosmodrome, a location deliberately chosen due to the North Korean leader's "great interest in rocket technology" (Лента Новости, 2023). The North Korean delegation was also shown around Russian military infrastructure throughout the visit, touring an aircraft plant in Komsomolsk-on-Amur, in which Su-35 and Su-57 fighters are produced, and an airbase in Vladivostok containing bombers such as Tu-160, Tu-95, and Tu-22, which have been actively used in Ukraine (The Guardian, 2023).

Officially, Putin has offered to provide North Korea with humanitarian aid and has spoken positively about the prospect of a constructive relationship between the two countries. At the same time, Kim Jong-un has expressed his support for Russia's "sacred struggle for the punishment of a gathering evil that claims hegemony and feeds an expansionist illusion" (Лента Новости, 2023). Undoubtedly, both sides can offer each other much-needed support in achieving their respective strategic goals. Are we witnessing the rebirth of a Cold War-era strategic partnership between the two nations? What might the consequences of such a partnership be on the ground in Ukraine?

## A Partnership Rooted in History

Naturally, given the presence of the bipolar world order, the Soviet Union and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) shared an ideological bond during the Cold War. The USSR recognised the North Korean state as the "only legitimate representative" of the Korean people until the late 1980s (Zhebin, 1995). This close relationship had numerous implications in the Soviet-North Korean military sphere as, throughout the Cold War, the Soviet Union was the DPRK's most important source of modern military hardware and equipment (Joo, Joo & Kwak, 2001; Zhihua, 2000). Furthermore, the Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Assistance was signed between the two countries in July 1961, in which both sides pledged military assistance to each other in the event of armed conflict. However, the Russo-North Korean relationship can nonetheless be characterised as lukewarm throughout the Cold War. Ideological overlap faded as the Soviets grew weary of the North's developing cult of personality. Concurrently, from a North Korean perspective, suspicion of the post-Stalinist Soviet Union emerged in force as a result of a failed Soviet attempt to oust Kim Il-sung in 1956 (International Crisis Group, 2007). However, cooperation was forced, especially in the 1980s, because the DPRK desperately needed support to keep up with the modernising South Korean military, and the Soviets understood the geostrategic importance of North Korea in countering U.S. influence in the region (Zhebin, 1995). Thus, regardless of their differences, both had plenty of incentive to compromise with one another.

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The collapse of the Soviet Union and the birth of the new Russian state in the early 1990s caused a split in the previously 'forced' Soviet-North Korean friendship. As the emerging Russian state initially turned to the West by attempting to democratise and transition to a market economy, the normalisation of relations with Seoul was pursued, while military cooperation with the DPRK was suspended, even if arms sales continued normatively. Russo-North Korean relations only improved when Russia's westward turn stagnated in the 1990s. Subsequently, Moscow's foreign policy flipped by pursuing renewed relations with ex-Soviet allies, such as the DPRK. Hence, in March 1999, steps were initiated towards a renewed Russo-North Korean treaty, which was signed in February 2000 after Putin's ascendancy to the Russian presidency. This new treaty, although similar to its Soviet predecessor, contained an ambiguous "mutual consultation" clause in the event of armed aggression instead of the previous automatic response obligation (Buszynski, 2009).

In June 2000, Vladimir Putin became the first Russian leader to visit Pyongyang, marking the "formal closure of uncomfortable relations and the onset of a new relationship" (Joo, Joo & Kwak, 2001). Throughout Putin's early years as Russian President, his administration sought to position itself as an intermediary on the Korean Peninsula, attempting to maintain appropriate relations with both sides. Therefore, arms were only sold to Pyongyang on a commercial basis, as Moscow knew that the extensive sale of weapons to North Korea would compromise its relationship with Seoul and damage relations with Washington (Joo, Joo & Kwak, 2001).

Putin's pragmatic foreign policy enabled an initial rapprochement between Russia and North Korea after the distancing of the Yeltsin years. However, as Russo-Western relations steadily deteriorated over the subsequent decades, a closer strategic partnership became more feasible.

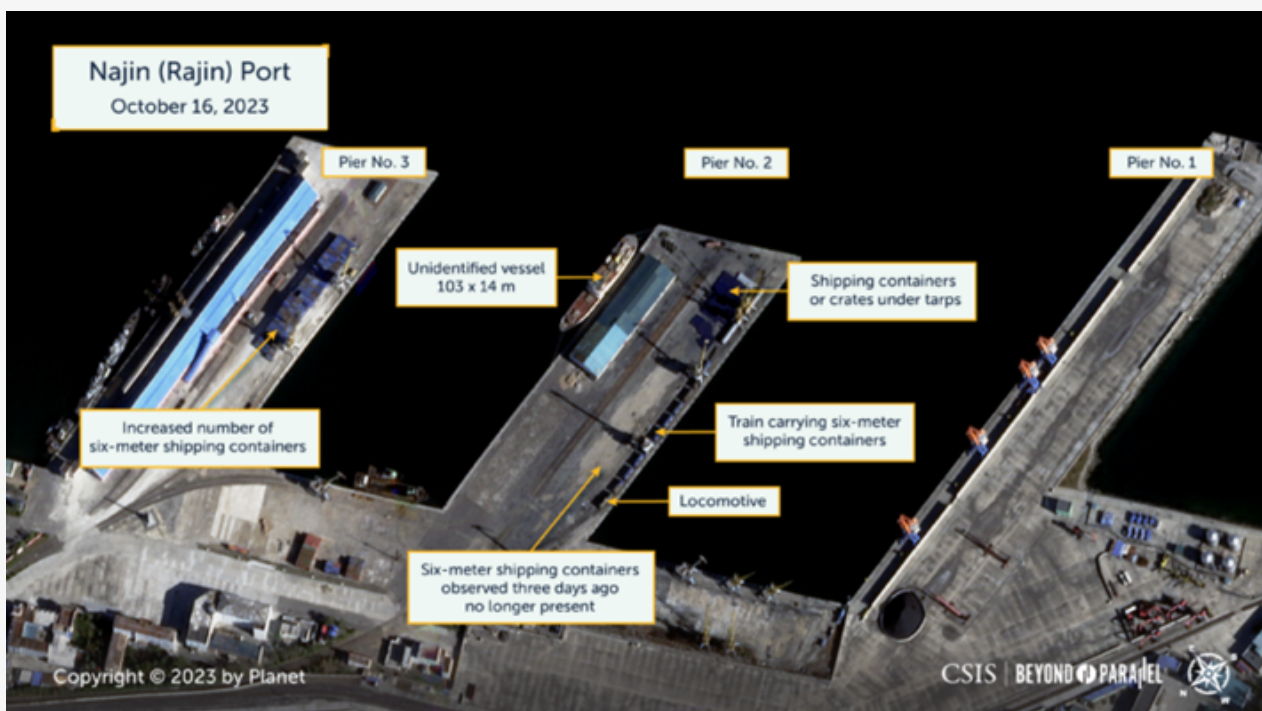
## **A Partnership Reborn**

Since Vladimir Putin ordered the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the Russian state has found itself completely isolated from the West. In response to Russian forces being bogged down on the battlefield and the everlasting threat of Ukrainian counteroffensives, the Kremlin has few potential international partners to turn to. Under these circumstances, closer alignment with North Korea seems inevitable because it is a country that, just like Russia, is under strict sanctions and remains estranged from a substantial section of the international community. Consequently, there has been concern about the rekindling of Russo-North Korean military cooperation. The U.S. government warned of potential Russian procurement of North Korean weaponry throughout the conflict's first year (Hunnicuttt & Brunnstrom, 2022), while also accusing North Korea of supplying battlefield missiles and rockets to the Wagner mercenary group in late 2022 (BBC, 2022). Moreover, Russia's Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu publicly visited Pyongyang in summer 2023 for the 70th anniversary of North Korea's Victory Day, where he toured an arms exhibition featuring conventional weapons and nuclear-capable ballistic missiles (Yim & Smith, 2023). It is important to note that a Russo-North Korean arms deal would be a violation of UN sanctions, specifically banning "the trade of arms and military equipment, dual-use technologies, vehicles, industrial machinery, and metals" (Council on Foreign Relations, 2022).

On 13 October 2023, the U.S. National Security Council spokesman, John Kirby, announced during a White House press conference that the Biden administration has information that, in recent weeks, North Korea provided Russia with “more than 1,000 containers of military equipment and munitions” (New York Post, 2023). The White House released the following image mapping the movement of these containers from the DPRK to an ammunition depot near Tikhoretsk, approximately 200 kilometres from the Ukrainian border (DeYoung, 2023). In this process, the containers were tracked moving between the Rajin port in North Korea and the Dunay military facility in Russia. Subsequent analysis of the ins and outs of the Rajin port has further demonstrated an increase in activities in the month of October 2023, potentially indicating the transfer of munitions and military equipment between the two countries by sea (Bermudez, Cha & Jun, 2023b). However, although noteworthy, it is important to underline that it is impossible to discern with one hundred per cent certainty whether this specific cargo consists of military equipment due to coverings used to mask the contents.

According to RUSI, three Russia-flagged vessels, Angara, Maria, and Lady R, have made multiple trips back and forth to Rajin port from the Dunay military facility in the Russian Far East (Byrne et al., 2023). The U.S. government currently sanctions these Russian ships, as they share connections with Russian military logistics networks (U.S. Department of State, 2022). Satellite images show the vessels unloading containers at Pier No.3 (fig.1), before proceeding to Pier No.2 (fig.1), where North Korean crates are loaded before a return trip to Dunay.

**Figure 1** – Increased Activity at Rajin Port, North Korea (Centre for Strategic and International Studies)



Increased port activity has been supplemented by developments at the Russo-North Korean border, which is an approximately 17-kilometre-long slim stretch of land connecting the two countries near the major Russian city of Vladivostok in the Far East. Satellite imagery has confirmed extensive railcar traffic in the North Korean and Russian border towns of Tumangang and Khasan, respectively. As per images captured just weeks after the Kim-Putin summit (**fig.2**), 73 railcars were present at the Tumangang Rail Facility on 5 October 2023, a huge increase from the previous average of approximately 20 railcars at the facility at most on a given day (Bermudez, Cha & Jun, 2023a). Once again, tarps conceal the contents of the containers, making it impossible to know their nature beyond reasonable doubt.

**Figure 2** – *Satellite Imagery of the Tumangang Rail Facility, North Korean border with Russia (Centre for Strategic and International Studies).*



As demonstrated, substantial evidence suggests that Russo-North Korean arms trade is underway and both countries can offer each other significant aid equipment-wise. Due to former Soviet military aid, North Korea possesses large stockpiles of equipment compatible with systems currently used by the Russian military in Ukraine. This includes an enormous collection of potentially tens of millions of artillery shells, which are in calibres used by Russian forces (New York Times, 2023). Both sides also share common artillery systems. Not only are North Korea's more than 21,600 artillery pieces based on Soviet designs provided to them during the Cold War, but in some circumstances, they still use the exact same models as the Russian military (International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2022). For instance, in terms of towed artillery, both countries possess D-30, M-46, M-1937, and M-1943 systems (International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2022). The Russian military could use North Korean equipment to help replenish stock back up to their pre-war numbers of 4,400, 650, 100, and 700 respectively (International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2022).

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Furthermore, looking to counter Western armour on the battlefields of Ukraine, Putin may opt to procure anti-tank and anti-infrastructure equipment from the DPRK. Once again, Russia and North Korea possess common equipment in this area, both using MANPATs 9K111 Fagot and 9K111-1 Konkurs systems (International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2022). North Korea also has an arsenal of Soviet-made self-propelled anti-tank systems such as 9K11 Malyutka, which could be of use along with an enormous arsenal of over 3,500 main battle tanks consisting of Soviet T-34s, T-54s, T-55s, and T-62s. However, these dated Soviet tank models will no doubt be less desirable due to their limited effectiveness in opposition to modern Western armour provided to Ukraine (International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2022).

In exchange, Pyongyang is likely to seek food and energy aid from Russia to help cover shortfalls from economic difficulties caused by the border closures following the COVID-19 lockdowns (Kim & Kim, 2023). Kim Jong-un is also interested in securing components to construct weapons systems such as “long-range missiles, hypersonic ballistic weapons, nuclear-powered submarines, and spy satellites” (Kim & Kim, 2023). It is unlikely that Russia will easily concede advanced nuclear and ballistic missile-based technology, but according to Seoul, Russia is seemingly willing to budge in certain areas, as North Korea has already received technical assistance from Russia in relation to its goal of launching a reconnaissance satellite (Kim & Park, 2023). Kim Jong-un is also attempting to acquire Russian fighter jets in exchange for military aid to Moscow (Kim & Park, 2023).

## **Implications**

21 months into Putin’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the key question is whether North Korean equipment can make a difference on the Ukrainian battlefield. Fundamentally, it will be of utmost use in replenishing Russian artillery shells and the systems themselves. Abundance in this area will be the key to any further Russian offensive and defensive success in Ukraine. From the conflict’s opening exchanges, huge artillery strikes have been central to Russian strategy, as the Russian military adapted to shortcomings on the battlefield by using barrage fire tactics, launching artillery strikes on Ukrainian targets that lasted several hours to clear the way for mobile and infantry units to engage (Davydenko et al., 2022). Reports at various stages of the conflict have indicated that around 70 per cent of all Ukrainian combat casualties are due to artillery and rocket barrages, demonstrating the essential role of this tactic from a Russian military perspective (Epstein et al., 2023). Moreover, as defensive concerns have become more relevant, artillery has also proved key in Russia’s ability to hold Ukrainian forces at bay, compensating for deficiencies on the ground with its ability to strike targets across large distances (Cranny-Evans, 2023). However, with the Russian military firing up to 60,000 rounds per day, a lack of munitions has been a constant thorn in Russia’s side in achieving its goals (Epstein et al., 2023). According to Ukrainian estimates, Russia only has the capacity to produce 20,000 artillery rounds a month to add to its dwindling stockpile, which stood at millions at the start of the war (Hambling, 2023). Pyongyang cannot offer any advanced precision ammunition, but it can supply plenty of artillery used for barrage-type combat (Smith, 2023).

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Overall, an influx of North Korean weaponry is beneficial for Russia, specifically regarding the supply of artillery shells to enable the continuation of barrage tactics at least for the foreseeable future. In terms of artillery, anti-tank, and anti-infrastructure systems themselves, both countries' shared history and possession of Soviet-era arms ensure that contemporary Russian forces are familiar with many North Korean systems, allowing Russia to circumvent the issue of having to train military personnel in the use of anomalous models. In the words of John Kirby, "Russia is not prepared to give up" and military aid from Pyongyang will allow Russian forces to continue the fight, at least in the short term (DeYoung, 2023). Hence, if this conflict is to end in a manner which is favourable to Ukraine, it is critical that Europe's support for Ukraine does not waver in the face of Russian military persistence. This could well be an uphill battle, as recent polls suggest a significant drop in European support for military aid to Ukraine since the start of the conflict in February 2022 (Bickerton, 2023).

Beyond just Ukraine, North Korea will likely continue its traditional path: using funds generated from arms deliveries to violate international sanctions by advancing its nuclear and ballistic missile programme (Byrne et al., 2023). This no doubt poses a threat to international security. Additionally, as failures in Ukraine potentially become an existential threat to Putin's regime, Kim Jong-un could find himself with more bargaining power in the Russo-North Korean relationship, a dangerous dynamic considering Russia's influence as a permanent UN Security Council member. Although Putin and Kim's interests have fundamentally converged for transactional purposes in recent months, little prevents the relationship from evolving into an all-out strategic partnership.

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