



## The Eurasia Center's East Asia & International Security Programs

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### Russia and North Korea's Increasingly Intertwined Alliance



*Meeting between North Korean dictator Kim Jong Un and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov. Photo Credit: Russian Foreign Ministry Press Service telegram channel via AP.*

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## Russia and North Korea Exchange Weapons With One Another Russia and North Korea are Increasingly Supporting Each Other



*Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and North Korean Foreign Minister Choe Son Hu shaking hands.  
Photo Credit: Russian Foreign Ministry Press Service telegram channel via AP.*

On September 19, 2023, Kevin Zhang published an amazing article for the Eurasia-America Center regarding a summit between North Korea and Russia. During this meeting, held on September 12, Vladimir Putin and Kim Jong-Un reaffirmed their cooperation with one another in light of the ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine. North Korea had been providing artillery in exchange for acquiring knowledge on satellites. Aside from the obvious implications of two authoritarian nations forging closer relations, this terrified Western leaders. There are also numerous violations of UN agreements to consider. However, no official agreements or alliances were made between the two nations at this meeting.<sup>1</sup> “The emerging collaboration between these two nations presents a complex challenge for the United States now that it must deal with potential North Korean weapons on the Ukrainian front and a belligerent state armed with Russian technology in Asia-Pacific.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Kevin Zhang, “Potential Arms Deal? Russia-North Korea Summit in Eastern Russia,” The Eurasia-America Center, September 19, 2023.

<sup>2</sup> Zhang, “Potential Arms Deal? Russia-North Korea Summit in Eastern Russia.”

Approximately a month later, it seems that Russia and North Korea have become even closer and seem to be on the brink of formally making an alliance. On October 13, the White House declared that North Korea sent more than 1,000 containers of munitions and military equipment to help Russia in its fight against Ukraine, thereby confirming the suspicions regarding the meeting between the two nations last month. The munitions had been shipped between September 7 and October 1.<sup>3</sup> Several days after these munitions had been sent, in the North Korean capital of Pyongyang, the foreign minister of Russia, Sergey Lavrov, met Kim Jong-un and his top diplomat, Choe Son Hui. The trip aimed to “focus on how to boost the countries’ defense ties following a September summit between Kim and Russian President Vladimir Putin.”<sup>4</sup>

Kim Jong Un expressed his commitment to continue the agreements between Russia and North Korea in September. Son Hui and Lavrov agreed to future exchanges in 2024 and 2025. These exchanges were decided upon due to the mutual desire amongst both nations to stand against what they deemed to be the aggressive United States and its allies.<sup>5</sup> In other words, the meeting held in September is only the beginning as both the leaders of Russia and North Korea have discussed the prospect of forming alliances in all areas, not just in the military area but economic ones as well. Making things even worse, the North Korean acquisition of Russian weapons could threaten to destabilize East Asia. “The recent flurry of diplomacy between Russia and North Korea underscores how their interests are aligning in the face of their separate, intensifying confrontations with the United States-North Korea over its advancing nuclear program and Russia over its war with Ukraine.”<sup>6</sup> Choe Son Hui declared that the alliance forged between the two nations should be unbreakable. At the same time, Lavrov expressed Russia’s full support of Kim Jong Un’s regime as a token of thanks for his explicit support of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.<sup>7</sup>

This cooperation is nothing new given how the relations between the two nations date back to the Cold War, with the Soviet Union having installed Kim Il Sung, the first ruler of North Korea.

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<sup>3</sup> Aamer Madhani, “US Says North Korea Delivered 1,000 Containers of Equipment and Munitions to Russia for Ukraine War,” AP News, October 13, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/north-korea-russia-us-munitions-ukraine-war-7091eaba254b680888a9b1ec8a68135f>.

<sup>4</sup> “Russia’s Foreign Minister Offers Security Talks with North Korea and China as He Visits Pyongyang,” AP News, October 19, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/north-korea-russia-kim-putin-ukraine-41e72f8e5577d37b8eb463e3c6d661c7>.

<sup>5</sup> Hyonhee Shin, “North Korea’s Kim Vows to ‘faithfully’ Fulfil Agreements Made with Russia’s Putin,” Reuters, October 20, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/north-koreas-kim-expresses-resolve-fulfil-agreements-made-with-russias-putin-2023-10-19/>.

<sup>6</sup> “Russia’s Foreign Minister Offers Security Talks with North Korea and China as He Visits Pyongyang.”

<sup>7</sup> “Russia’s Foreign Minister Offers Security Talks with North Korea and China as He Visits Pyongyang.”

Throughout the remainder of the Soviet Union, it helped financially prop up North Korea. Thus, one can see how the growing alliance between Russia and North Korea is a restoration of Cold War-era tensions between democracies and autocracies.<sup>8</sup> However, there is still uncertainty regarding how successfully close these two nations will become and whether or not Putin will visit Pyongyang.<sup>9</sup> In light of all these events, John Kirby, the spokesperson for the White House Security Council, condemned North Korea's support for the Russian invasion of Ukraine.<sup>10</sup> Russia has adamantly refuted claims made by the United States regarding its receiving of weapons from North Korea. According to Kirby, North Korea has been giving Russia these weapons in exchange for acquiring Russian technology needed to enhance its nuclear program.<sup>11</sup> Adding to the already high international tensions, the United States and South Korea have been conducting military exercises in the Korean peninsula, along with conducting exercises with Japan.<sup>12</sup> In response, North Korea has expressed its disapproval of the joint exercises conducted by the U.S. and South Korea in addition to the presence of American "strategic assets." It views these acts as being provocative, going as far as to accuse the U.S. and South Korea of potentially instigating nuclear war.<sup>13</sup>

It is undeniably apparent that the possibility of North Korea and Russia forging a formal alliance where they can collectively combine their resources to expand their respective spheres of influence is a terrifying concept. It is difficult to say how tensions could be lowered. The best action would be for America and South Korea to conduct their exercises carefully. In addition, America should ensure the steadfastness of its alliances in Europe and Asia to combat the potential alliance of North Korea and Russia.

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<sup>8</sup> Madhani, "US Says North Korea Delivered 1,000 Containers of Equipment and Munitions to Russia for Ukraine War."

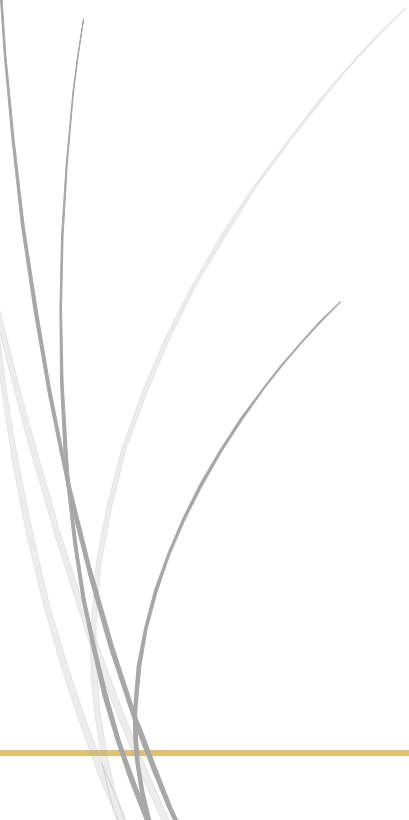
<sup>9</sup> "Russia's Foreign Minister Offers Security Talks with North Korea and China as He Visits Pyongyang."

<sup>10</sup> Madhani, "US Says North Korea Delivered 1,000 Containers of Equipment and Munitions to Russia for Ukraine War."

<sup>11</sup> "Russia Dismisses US Claims of North Korea Supplying Munitions to Moscow," Voice of America, October 20, 2023, <https://www.voanews.com/a/russia-dismisses-us-claims-of-north-korea-supplying-munitions-to-moscow-/7320060.html>.

<sup>12</sup> "Russia's Foreign Minister Offers Security Talks with North Korea and China as He Visits Pyongyang."

<sup>13</sup> Shin, "North Korea's Kim Vows to 'faithfully' Fulfil Agreements Made with Russia's Putin."



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