

# **RUSSIA-CHINA-NORTH KOREA RELATIONS:** **Obstacles to a Trilateral Axis**

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This publication was funded by the Russia Strategic Initiative, U.S. European Command. The views expressed in this publication do not necessarily represent the views of the Department of Defense or the United States Government.

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March 15, 2025



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## **Obstacles to a Trilateral Axis**

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## About the Author

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The Eurasia Program at the Foreign Policy Research Institute was founded in 2015 with the aim of examining the political, security, economic, and social trends shaping Europe and Eurasia. Our research agenda covers the increasingly tense competition roiling the region from several angles. It has a multi-year focus on the Baltic Sea, the Black Sea, and Central Asia, emphasizing how geography, economics, ideology, and history continue to shape politics and security in these regions. The program also publishes analyses of Russian foreign policy, including Russia's role in Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. The Russia Political Economy Project, along with the Bear Market Brief, analyzes the linkages between Russia's economy, society, and its political system. The Eurasia Program's thematic initiatives also include the Democracy at Risk rubric, which examines the trends of democratization and authoritarian pushback in the region.

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# Introduction

Russia and China have had diplomatic relations with North Korea and each other for more than 75 years, but Russian and Chinese relations with North Korea could not be more different. North Korea is China's sole military ally, but—as PRC historian Shen Zhihua has cautioned—since the normalization of ties between Beijing and Seoul, the PRC-North Korea alliance was really just a “scrap of paper.”<sup>1</sup>

By contrast, Sino-Russian military ties have been deepening; however, both countries claim they are uninterested in replicating Cold War era alliances and have committed instead to a priority partnership “for the new era.”<sup>2</sup> In June 2024, Russia and North Korea signed a strategic partnership agreement with a mutual defense clause. China's 1961 treaty with North Korea (renewed most recently in 2021) also contains a mutual defense clause, raising questions about the existence of a trilateral axis.

Claims about the existence of such an axis also point to the anti-Western positions these states share and their potential to undertake coordinated action directed against Western interests.<sup>3</sup> Critics of this view argue that there is scant evidence for the existence of such an axis beyond the current (albeit very different) assistance by China and North Korea (plus Iran) for the Russian full-scale war in Ukraine.<sup>4</sup> They also contend that trilateralism will not endure beyond this war.<sup>5</sup> Others argue that such an axis would not be in Chinese interests.<sup>6</sup> What is lacking in this discussion is an

understanding of the indicators of a China-Russia-North Korea axis. How do we know if they are choosing to form an axis? Or not?

This paper begins by examining the history of Russia-China-North Korea interactions, highlighting Sino-Russian differences in emphasis regarding North Korea prior to the full-scale war in Ukraine. To assess whether a trilateral axis formed after 2022, the paper examines evidence of institutionalized cooperation, coordination of Chinese and North Korean military aid to Russia for Ukraine, and Russian and Chinese expert perspectives. The paper then addresses the obstacles to the formation of a trilateral axis.

Although authoritarian states share an overriding interest in regime security and political survival, this does not necessarily mean that we should expect solidarity among similarly disposed regimes or believe that they would inevitably form an anti-Western axis. Considerable research has been done on the reasons why authoritarian states choose to support one another,<sup>7</sup> but it is important to understand what factors might limit their cooperation.<sup>8</sup> This paper examines how the historical experience of trilateralism, reputational concerns, foreign policy considerations, and domestic factors make a new China-Russia-North Korea axis unlikely.

# Recent Trends in Russia-North Korea- China Relations

Before Russia's full-scale war in Ukraine, Russia and China pursued an overlapping but not identical agenda on Korean security.<sup>9</sup> In a July 4, 2017 agreement, their first joint statement on Korean security, China and Russia proposed a moratorium on North Korea's testing of nuclear and ballistic weapons in exchange for a suspension of US-ROK exercises and urged compliance with UN resolutions, a resumption of security dialogue, and the creation of a regional security architecture.<sup>10</sup> Their joint proposal blended Russia's concept of "parallel advancement" with China's "double-freeze" idea. For Russia, the aim was to demonstrate its relevance as a security partner in Northeast Asia and contribute to the development of a regional security architecture.<sup>11</sup>

**Before Russia's full-scale war in Ukraine, Russia and China pursued an overlapping but not identical agenda on Korean security.**

By contrast, China, which had played a key role in earlier rounds of talks about the North Korean nuclear program, viewed the suspension of US military exercises with South Korea as its key goal.<sup>12</sup> Although both opposed the US deployment of Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) ballistic missile defense systems in South Korea, China imposed economic sanctions on Seoul in response, sharply curtailing Chinese tourism in South Korea and some South Korean investments in China, while Russia continued to view South Korea as an important partner for the development of the Russian Far East and the Arctic. Nevertheless, in 2018, China, Russia, and North Korea held several rounds of trilateral talks to coordinate their positions on nuclear talks with the US.<sup>13</sup>

Border closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic led to a hiatus in North Korea's interactions with Russia and China. After Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022, Kim Jong-un emerged as an important supporter of Russia's war in Ukraine at the United Nations—a move that Vladivostok-based scholar Artyom Lukin saw as critical to the emergence of a quasi-alliance between the two countries beginning in 2022. North Korea is one of only two states (the other being Syria) to accord the occupied territories of Donetsk and Luhansk diplomatic recognition, and it has voted in support of Russian positions on Ukraine multiple times at the UN.

In 2023, Russia rewarded North Korea's support of Ukraine with food aid and oil deliveries, and Russian and North Korean officials began exchanging high-level visits—at least 10 between mid-July 2023 and July 2024.<sup>14</sup> In September 2023, Kim



Russia's President Vladimir Putin and North Korea's leader Kim Jong Un attend an official welcoming ceremony at Kim Il Sung Square in Pyongyang, North Korea in this image released by the Korean Central News Agency June 20, 2024. (KCNA/REUTERS)

Jong-un attended the Russian Far East Economic Forum in Vladivostok where he met with Vladimir Putin and visited the Vostochny Cosmodrome. That year, North Korea began supplying millions of rounds of ammunition and missiles to Russia.<sup>15</sup> In return, Russia may have provided North Korea with missile and space technology as a successful missile test (December 2023) and satellite launch (February 2024) soon followed.<sup>16</sup>

On March 28, 2024, Russia vetoed a UN Security Council resolution that would have extended the experts panel monitoring the sanctions on North Korea, effectively ending them. China abstained on the resolution. Subsequently, in the agreement issued after their May 2024 summit meeting, Xi and Putin stated that sanctions, repression, and intimidation of North Korea in order to push it toward

negotiation should end.<sup>17</sup> Although both China and Russia previously agreed to sanctions on North Korea, they did so reluctantly due to their general position opposing sanctions (on authoritarian states). However, there was evidence of their complicity in helping North Korea evade sanctions.<sup>18</sup>

In April 2024, Zhao Leji, formally the head of the National People's Congress and the third-highest-ranking leader of the Chinese Communist Party, visited North Korea to strengthen ties and mark the 75th anniversary of formal diplomatic relations between the People's Republic of China and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. The following month, Xi and Putin met in Beijing, and reportedly Chinese officials dissuaded Putin from visiting Pyongyang directly before or after Beijing.

On June 18–19, 2024, Putin met with Kim Jong-un in Pyongyang, and the two leaders signed a treaty for comprehensive strategic partnership, including a mutual defense clause.<sup>19</sup> Although North Korea now refers to the relationship with Russia as an alliance, Russia continues to call it a partnership and has not published the full text, though Pyongyang has done so. According to Lukin, this could mean that it was North Korea that pushed for the mutual defense clause, not Russia.<sup>20</sup> Alternatively, it could mean that Russia does not want to emphasize this fact in case it seeks to distance from this later. This already occurred once in the 1990s when Russia began engaging with South Korea and distanced itself from North Korea, allowing the 1961 agreement (with a mutual defense clause) to lapse. Its replacement did not include a mutual defense clause.<sup>21</sup>

**China’s official response downplayed the Putin visit and the further development of Russia-North Korea military relations as a bilateral matter.**

China’s official response downplayed the Putin visit and the further development of Russia-North Korea military relations as a bilateral matter. PRC Foreign Ministry Lin Jian stated that “...China welcomes Russia to consolidate and develop traditional friendly relations with relevant countries...China and North Korea are

close neighbors connected by mountains and rivers and maintain traditional friendly and cooperative relations.” At that time, Chinese diplomats were in Seoul, where Vice Foreign Minister Sun Weidong and Major General Zhang Baoqun, deputy director of the Chinese Military’s International Cooperation Office, were taking part in the 2+2 Ministerial (diplomatic and security) Dialogue. This visit came three weeks after the first trilateral summit with Japan in five years at the prime minister level. The statement the three countries signed advocating a nuclear-free Korean Peninsula provoked an unusual public criticism by North Korea.<sup>22</sup>

## An Axis in the Making?

What would we need to see if an axis existed? An axis would require more than a shared authoritarian playbook and anti-Western orientation. We would expect to see some formalized cooperation among the three countries. Even Russia, India, and China have regular trilateral dialogues, although their engagements fall far short of an axis due to the many tensions in Sino-Indian relations. We would anticipate a coordinated approach to assisting Russia in Ukraine. Although China has supported North Korea’s military development over the years, there is little evidence of active coordination of Chinese and North Korean military support to Russia in Ukraine. Finally, we would find evidence of widespread support among Russian and Chinese elites for such an axis. Such supporters exist, especially in Russia, but there are many detractors as well.



Zhao Leji (front, 2nd from R), chairman of the Standing Committee of the Chinese National People's Congress, is greeted by North Korean people upon his arrival in Pyongyang on April 11, 2024, for a ceremony marking the 75th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic ties between China and North Korea. (Kyodo/REUTERS)

There is no institutionalized cooperation among Russia, China, and North Korea, and they have not yet engaged in any trilateral military exercises. According to South Korean intelligence, Russia proposed a trilateral naval exercise in 2023, but there have not been any trilateral exercises to date.<sup>23</sup> In September 2024, North Korea participated as an observer for the first time in Russia's large-scale OKEAN-24 naval exercise in September 2024.<sup>24</sup>

There is little evidence of direct Chinese support for North Korean military aid to Russia's war in Ukraine. Beginning in October 2024, North Korea began supplying troops, believed to number 11,000 in total, to the Kursk front, which met the mutual defense standard of the Russia-North Korea agreement.<sup>25</sup> This came just a few months after China teamed up with Brazil on a peace proposal for Ukraine in May 2024, calling

for de-escalation by not expanding the battlefield or escalating the fighting.<sup>26</sup>

The Biden administration urged China to pass on a message to Kim Jong-un to limit the use of North Korean troops in Ukraine and emphasize the negative consequences of continuing such support.<sup>27</sup> The US typically has looked to China to use its economic leverage over North Korea to induce its cooperation with international norms, and this case was no exception. China's own wide-ranging support for Russia's war, albeit short of direct lethal aid, gives credence to Beijing's tacit approval (or at least lack of open disapproval) of North Korea's direct military assistance to Moscow. Moreover, one of the North Korean vessels used in its illicit weapons deliveries to Russia was reportedly serviced in a Chinese port, suggesting some limited support by a Chinese entity.<sup>28</sup>

Many Russian and Chinese experts reject the idea of a trilateral axis with North Korea. Russian opponents of an axis point to their country's long-standing positions opposing nuclear proliferation on the Korean Peninsula and foreign policy interests in engaging with South Korea. Chinese opposition is even more broadly based because of the fundamental challenge such an axis would pose to Xi Jinping's signature security initiatives as well as to PRC foreign policy interests in Europe, Asia, and the Global South.

### **Chinese analysts are more uniformly critical of a trilateral axis with Russia and North Korea.**

Although some Russian and Chinese experts view the establishment of a Russia-China-North Korea axis as a response to the emergence of an Asian NATO and the increased pressures by the US and its allies in the Indo-Pacific, there is also considerable pushback against this view in both countries.<sup>29</sup> Chinese analysts are more uniformly critical of a trilateral axis with Russia and North Korea. Wang Jisi, a prominent scholar at Peking University, makes the claim, oft-repeated in the Chinese-language commentary, that the Western officials are trying to divide the world into camps and separate China from the Global South by linking it to the “East” with Russia and North Korea.<sup>30</sup>

Zhao Long, a scholar at the Shanghai Institute of International Studies, acknowledges that there is some support in Russia for trilateral cooperation with

China and North Korea. Zhao concedes that the three countries are united in their opposition to confrontation between blocs of states and the pressure tactics by Western states, he argues that the “alliance security” model guided by binary “us-versus-them” thinking is not in line with the Global Security Initiative advocated by China—one of Xi's three centerpiece foreign policy initiatives advocating common, comprehensive, and cooperative security.<sup>31</sup>

## **Factors that Hinder an Axis**

Despite their shared anti-Western orientation, four factors create obstacles to the formation of a full-fledged axis. First and foremost, the negative experience of the Korean War provides considerable disincentives, especially for China but also for North Korea. Second, China and—to a lesser extent—Russia would face reputational costs if they committed to such an axis. Third, if they opted for an axis with North Korea, both China and Russia would sacrifice important foreign policy interests in East Asia. Finally, China, Russia, and North Korea have failed thus far to implement substantial trilateral economic cooperation along their shared borders.

## **Historical Precedents**

One would think that Chinese and North Korean participation in the Soviet-supported Korean War would have set a precedent for their current trilateral cooperation. To the contrary, historical

legacies continue to shadow China-North Korea relations in particular. PRC historians Shen Zihua and Xia Yafeng argue that portraying the Cold War era relationship between the two countries as being “as close as lips and teeth” is a misreading of history. They point to major differences between China and North Korea over the prosecution of the Korean War and steps toward peace.<sup>32</sup>

Reflections by Chinese observers of PRC support for North Korea during the war express some buyer’s remorse for the sacrifices made—one million Chinese casualties and considerable economic assistance at a time when the new People’s Republic of China could least afford it. As one retired PLA colonel noted, “We once tightened our belts to support others, and we all know what the result was.”<sup>33</sup> He argued that China’s nonalignment policy is correct and that a trilateral alliance would not be in China’s interests, as it might require China to send troops to Ukraine. “Some say that China will lose friends if it does this [i.e., not support a trilateral alliance], but do you know how troublesome it is to be the boss? You have to clean up the mess that others have made,” he added.<sup>34</sup> According to a South Korean scholar, North Korean leaders have been equally wary of a trilateral axis due to their country’s priority on *Juche* (self-reliance ideology), negative experiences from the Korean War, and fear of pro-China domestic political opponents.<sup>35</sup> Yet North Korea, though substantially weaker than its two primary partners, has been remarkably adept at maneuvering between them.<sup>36</sup>

## Reputational Costs

Russia’s deepening military partnership with North Korea raises questions about its role in abetting Pyongyang’s nuclear ambitions and Russia’s reputation as a member of the UN Security Council, which has sought to restrain the North Korean nuclear program via sanctions. Moreover, North Korea’s rhetoric on the “new Cold War” directly contradicts Chinese and Russian efforts to oppose this tendency, which they attribute to US and NATO policies.

### *Enabling North Korea’s Nuclear Ambitions*

Prior to the full-scale war in Ukraine, Russia viewed North Korea as an “ambiguous and difficult” partner.<sup>37</sup> After North Korea left the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty in 2003, Russia participated in the six-party talks on North Korea’s nuclear program. As a signatory to the treaty, Russia is obligated to prevent nuclear proliferation to non-nuclear states. Yet, Putin formally recognized that North Korea is a nuclear power and stated that it made no sense to apply economic or military pressure to change that fact. After North Korea conducted its sixth nuclear test in 2017, Putin quipped that “in the DPRK [Democratic People’s Republic of North Korea] they would rather eat grass than give up nuclear testing.”<sup>38</sup>

Nevertheless, Russia (and China) supported sanctions against North Korea for its violations of UN resolutions until March 2024. As former Russian International Affairs Council President



North Korean state media publishes photo on Saturday Nov 19, 2022 shows the launch of the new intercontinental ballistic missile Hwasong-17. (KCNA/REUTERS)

Andrei Kortunov explained, nuclear proliferation anywhere “cannot meet Russia’s strategic interests.”<sup>39</sup> He further argued that he found it hard to imagine that Russia would abandon the UN Security Council sanctions regime for North Korea altogether.

According to Russian Korea expert Konstantin Asmolov, the text of the strategic partnership agreement between Russia and North Korea does not alter Russia’s position on the sanctions regime. Article 16 mentions that the two countries are opposed to “unilateral coercive measures,” meaning sanctions imposed by individual countries, but, like Kortunov, Asmolov points out that nothing was said about ignoring UN Security Council sanctions, and Russia has not yet formally indicated it was no longer bound by them.<sup>40</sup>

### ***Supporting Kim Jong-un’s “New Cold War” Rhetoric***

In their May 2024 joint statement, Xi and Putin claimed that the Sino-Russian partnership is “a more advanced form of interstate interaction compared to the military-political alliances of the Cold War and are not bloc-based or confrontational in nature.”<sup>41</sup> Both Xi and Putin have spoken out in recent years against what they saw as US efforts to wage a new Cold War through US-led alliances and military deployments. “No attempt to wage a new Cold War will ever be allowed by the people or by our times,” Xi told the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in November 2024.<sup>42</sup> Similarly, prior to Russia’s full-scale war in Ukraine, Putin called comparisons of the international order to a “new Cold War” propagandistic.<sup>43</sup>

Kim Jong-un, however, has repeatedly described the international order as a new Cold War. Unlike Xi and Putin, Kim sees a new Cold War as advantageous. According to an analysis by a South Korean scholar, Kim views Russia's war in Ukraine as a just effort to combat US hegemony, where North Korea can play a key support role.<sup>44</sup> The North Korean viewpoint creates some dissonance for Russia and China who have portrayed the emergence of a new Cold War as a negative scenario to be avoided. Moreover, the equation of support for Russia's war in Ukraine with participation in a new Cold War undermines Russian and Chinese efforts to justify the legitimacy of their own actions in the war and to blame the US and NATO for a deterioration in the international climate.

## Foreign Policy Impact

The deepening military relationship between Pyongyang and Moscow has coincided with a period of increased missile testing in North Korea—there were 64 tests in 2022, 30 in 2023, and over 40 in 2024.<sup>45</sup> Some Russian analysts contend that North Korean military strength, especially in partnership with Russian and Chinese forces, might actually serve as a stabilizing factor in Northeast Asia, counterbalancing the US, Japan, and South Korea.<sup>46</sup> Wooyeal Paik, deputy director of the Yonsei Institute of North Korean Studies in Seoul, sees Russian ties to North Korea as a “tactical counteroffensive” against the US. Paik argues that Russia enabling North Korea's military capabilities is a means of pushing back at US interests in Northeast Asia and paying back Washington for obstructing Russian territorial goals in Ukraine.<sup>47</sup>

Russian experts note, however, that North Korea's support for Russia in Ukraine is encouraging South Korea to provide additional military support to Ukraine, potentially even directly, a step that Seoul had avoided.<sup>48</sup>

**The Russia-North Korea partnership also puts at risk the ties that Russia and South Korea had been cultivating for several decades, including South Korean investment in the Russian Far East and the Arctic.**

The Russia-North Korea partnership also puts at risk the ties that Russia and South Korea had been cultivating for several decades, including South Korean investment in the Russian Far East and the Arctic. Since the mid-1990s and until the full-scale war in Ukraine, Russia had sought to maintain equidistant relations with North and South Korea to encourage energy development and energy projects that could potentially link the Korean Peninsula with the Russian Far East and encourage Korean unification in the long term.<sup>49</sup> Kortunov noted optimistically that the Russian leadership has not “completely abandoned” the hope of engaging with South Korea in the future, which will serve as a restraint on Russian positions on North Korea.<sup>50</sup> One former Russian diplomat, Georgy Toloraya, who



South Korean Vietnam War Veterans wave national flags during a rally against a recent deployment of North Korean troops to Russia in downtown Seoul, October 2024. (SOPA Images/REUTERS)

played an important role in Russia's earlier diplomacy on Korean issues, blames Seoul for its unfriendly attitude toward Russia today yet holds out some faint hope that Russia could pursue closer ties with North Korea without being forced to totally abandon its relationship with the South. He, too, sees North Korean military power as a restraint on conflict in the Korean Peninsula at a time when both sides have given up on unification as a policy goal.<sup>51</sup>

According to the Chinese Foreign Ministry, "China is happy to see North Korea and Russia grow their ties and play a constructive role for the peace and stability of this region."<sup>52</sup> Yet, for China, the military partnership between Russia and North Korea poses many risks.<sup>53</sup> The emergence of an "Asian NATO" including the US, Japan, and South Korea has been a key concern. Chinese experts saw the trilateral meeting with President Biden in August 2023 as a first step in

that direction. Chinese observers also note that Russian military support for North Korea could increase tensions on the Korean Peninsula and raise the prospect of confrontation there.<sup>54</sup> Chinese entrapment into a potential conflict on the Korean Peninsula is cause for concern, and experts differ in their level of confidence regarding China's leverage over North Korea successfully restraining its behavior.<sup>55</sup> Moreover, as China borders North Korea, a potential conflict would have a major impact on northeastern China. As one Chinese scholar put it, "North Korea's possession of nuclear weapons is like a sword hanging over the heads of the people in Northeast China."<sup>56</sup>

Although it is unclear where this trilateral dialogue will go under the Trump administration and given the uncertainty in Seoul, for China, demonstrating support for the Russia-North Korea

partnership would serve as a further impediment to Beijing's efforts to engage with Europe and the US.<sup>57</sup> Moreover, the participation of North Korean troops in Russia's war in Ukraine also undermines China's position against expanding the conflict, a key criticism the Chinese media have directed against the US and its allies supporting Ukraine.

## Domestic Factors

For Russia, there are many benefits to deeper military ties to North Korea. A primary benefit is securing desperately needed ammunition, missiles, and other equipment followed by reducing the urgency of a broader mobilization of Russians to serve in Ukraine. North Koreans have also resumed working in Russia, which helps reduce the severe labor shortage there due to deployments, emigration, and the low birthrate. Russia had been cooperating with UN sanctions requiring the end of labor contracts with North Korea by 2019, but the number of North Korean "students" entering Russia has been increasing rapidly since 2023,<sup>58</sup> though still well below pre-2019 numbers, averaging 30,000–40,000 annually.<sup>59</sup> Although North Korean workers have primarily been involved in construction and the timber industry, there have been discussions about importing agricultural laborers to the Russian Far East, where Chinese farm workers had been more typically employed.<sup>60</sup> In some of Russia's eastern regions, there was a preference for North Korean workers on fixed contracts compared with the Chinese who might aim to set down roots and increase China's economic influence over this underpopulated part of Russia.

One area where there could potentially be an opportunity for trilateral cooperation is in the development of the Tumen River, where the borders of Russia, China, and North Korea meet, to encourage regional trade. This is a strategic area as North Korean shipments of weapons by rail travel to Russia via the Russia–North Korea Friendship Bridge over the Tumen River. Satellite imagery shows a sharp increase in activity on the North Korean side of the railway connection to Russia, supporting reporting from Seoul that Pyongyang has sent over 13,000 containers with war material to Russia.<sup>61</sup>

**One area of opportunity for trilateral cooperation is in the development of the Tumen River, where the borders of Russia, China, and North Korea meet, to encourage regional trade.**

Several obstacles impede the achievement of what might appear to be a mutually beneficial goal of expanding China-Russia-North Korea trade and transportation links. The river is rather shallow, making it impassable for large ships, and the Russia–DPRK Friendship Bridge is just 9 meters (29.5 feet) high, also limiting the height of passing ships. More importantly for China, the Chinese border is 15 km (9 miles) from the mouth of the Sea of Japan, preventing Northeast China's access to the Indo-Pacific



View of the Russia-North Korea railway bridge and the estuary of the Tumen River in Hunchun city, Yanbian prefecture, Jilin province, July 14, 2024. (CFOTO/Sipa USA/REUTERS)

and the Arctic and restricting regional development.<sup>62</sup> China lost access to the strategic outlet to the sea after the 1860 Treaty of Peking, one of the treaties with Russia that Chinese officials have termed “unequal.”

Although the 2024 joint statement by Xi and Putin mentioned ongoing discussions with North Korea on China’s access to the mouth of the Tumen River, no progress has been announced to date. Instead, China—along with Belarus—is investigating investing in a new port in Primorskii Krai in the Russian Far East and establishing a logistics base in the Tumen region. According to Chinese reporting, Belarus is involved in part to balance out China’s participation and assuage any fears about geopolitical equilibrium in the region.<sup>63</sup>

The lack of trilateral engagement to resolve navigation issues on the Tumen

River illustrates some of the underlying obstacles to economic trilateralism among Russia, North Korea, and China, even when an economic rationale may exist. For North Korea, it would be more beneficial for China (and Russia) to invest in ports like Rajin, the northernmost ice-free port in the region. In fact, China and Russia have long been competing to operate the port.<sup>64</sup> Regional ties between Russia and China have long been a weak point in an otherwise deepening partnership, leading to the abandonment in 2018 of a program to deepen ties with adjacent regions of the Russian Far East and Northeast China in favor of pairing this part of China with regions in European Russia.

# Conclusions

Despite a shared anti-Western alignment among Russia, China, and North Korea, several factors work against the formation of a trilateral axis. The fraught history of their collaboration during the Korean War is a key restraining factor. Although a communist bloc subsequently emerged in Northeast Asia, the legacy of the underlying tensions among the three sets limits to current and future trilateral projects. China and Russia today claim that the US is responsible for creating a new Cold War—and in Asia, they point to the formation of US-centered blocs as a primary driver. North Korea, by contrast, finds advantage in a new Cold War environment, putting it at odds with China and Russia, who would incur reputational costs in the Global South by pursuing that line of thinking.

**Despite a shared anti-Western alignment among Russia, China, and North Korea, several factors work against the formation of a trilateral axis.**

For Russia, a military partnership with North Korea puts at risk decades of engagement with South Korea and hopes of South Korean investment in the Russian Far East and the Arctic. With North Korean forces now fighting in Kursk, South Korea also has an incentive

to provide more substantial military support to Ukraine, though this would likely occur through third countries due to domestic laws prohibiting lethal aid to conflict zones.<sup>65</sup> For China, the prospect of Russia enabling North Korean testing and provocative actions on the Korean Peninsula raises the possibility of an arms race in Northeast Asia, a potential nuclear threat to Northeast China, and reduced opportunities to weaken the US-Japan-South Korea alliance. Finally, the most natural form of trilateralism—regional development in the Tumen River area where the three countries share borders—has still proven elusive due to competing regional interests and historical legacies.

This is not to say that the deepening anti-Western military partnerships between Russia and North Korea and between China and Russia are not sources for serious concern, even though the bilateral relationships may not add up to a full-fledged multilateral alliance.<sup>66</sup> Both partnerships make it possible for Russia to continue its war of aggression in Ukraine and increase instability in Northeast Asia. Nevertheless, it is important to track the specific indicators of their development of a trilateral axis to understand the parameters of their joint interactions. We need to look for signs of greater institutionalization, policy coordination, and support by Russian and Chinese elites to determine whether a trilateral axis actually is in the making.

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