

The Dynamics of Russia – North Korea – China Trilateral Balancing: Implications for the Indo-Pacific Region

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The visit by North Korean President Kim Jong Un to Russia and the Summit meeting with President Putin and the signing of a comprehensive strategic partnership deal during the return visit by the Russian President to North Korea in June 2024 pledging arms supply to North Korea has raised several interesting questions as to how this would affect the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine and more importantly how this will play out in the larger Indo Pacific region. The ongoing participation in the Ukraine war by North Korean special soldiers on behalf of Russian forces has raised eyebrows further. In fact, prior to this recent development, Russia has reportedly agreed to sell satellite technology, and North Korea in turn has agreed to supply ammunitions to Russia despite threats of further sanctions from the West. What is obvious in this development is the apprehensions on the part of the Western countries that are eager to end the war. But what is not obvious is why Russia did not bank on its traditional partner China which is a much closer ally than North Korea and which is even more antagonistic to the West, particularly the U.S. Other compelling questions are: how China would take such development given North Korea considered to be under its sphere of influence and hence the suspicions over the motivations of such an entente between Russia and North Korea; why Pyongyang in turn looks to Russia when it has been a traditional ally of China and finally what possibilities exist for all the three countries aligning together against the West despite differences. Was this summit meeting a reaction to the trilateral meeting that took place in August 2023 between US-Japan and South Korea? The aim, hence, is to inform the motivations behind this relationship and how this could be understood. The article tries to answer the above issues by tracing the background relations and describing and analyzing how the possibility of China-North Korea-Russia trilateral relations as against the existing U.S. – Japan – South Korea combination will play out and its repercussions on the Indo-Pacific region. It argues that Russia seeking defense relations with North Korea ‘other than China’ will have serious repercussions on the security and stability of the larger Indo-Pacific region.

Key Words: North Korea -Russia – China; Defence relations; Security; Russia - Ukraine war; Indo Pacific

The flurry of reports by the international media on the high-profile visit of North Korean President Kim Jong Un to Russia and the summit meeting with his Russian

counterpart in mid-September 2023 and reciprocated by Russia in June 2024 is indicative of the concerns raised by the West as to what such development could lend to the existing fragile security environment in East Europe and the Indo-Pacific region. In fact, the concerns are obvious since the meeting and its outcome cannot be ignored as just any other kind of diplomatic move. This is because the visit provided opportunities for both Russia and North Korea to strengthen their bilateral relations and commit to each other's support in their common position against the West with defense tie-ups as a highlighting factor in the entire episode. The return visit by Russian President Putin to North Korea materialized on 19 June 2024 during which their bilateral relations got elevated to that of a comprehensive strategic partnership agreement¹ with the clause of aiding each other if either is attacked (Roth J. M., 2024). While Russia has reportedly agreed to provide North Korea with ballistic missile technology that can potentially help augment its long-range missile capabilities North Korea has in turn agreed to supply war ammunition to Russia for use against Ukraine (Roth J. M., 2024).² In fact, it is not just war ammunition but special soldiers estimated to be about ten thousand that North Korea has of late dispatched to Russia (Siong, 2024). Both of these are detrimental to the interests of the international community - when seen in the light of the ongoing Russia – Ukraine war and its repercussions on the economy of several other countries and in terms of aggravating the fragile peace in the Korean peninsula. Even though the effect of Russia – North Korea coming together is obvious as reported in the media what is not obvious is why Russia did not desire to take the help of its traditional partner China which is even more powerful than North Korea and which is even more antagonistic to the West particularly the U.S. And therefore, this new bonhomie between Russia and North Korea is provoking enough to ponder how China would take such development given North Korea is considered to be under its sphere of influence not to mention the history of delicate relationship that defined all three countries and the suspicions that could shore up on China over the motivations of such renewed ties between Russia and North Korea. It is equally puzzling to ask why Pyongyang looks to Russia when it has been a traditional ally of China. And what would be the effect of all the three countries aligning together against the West despite differences when there is already a U.S. – Japan – South Korea axis in place in that part of the world.

More importantly all three countries - Russia, North Korea, and China – are nuclear weapon countries and therefore considering the nature of bilateral relations that both Russia and North Korea desire to take forward it will have significant strategic implications beyond the region. The aim, hence, is to inform what transpired in this relationship and how this could be understood. The article answers this by tracing the background relations to help chronologically understand the interplay of factors. The article argues that owing to the multiplicity of factors involved in the region with Russia seeking military cooperation with North Korea 'other than China' will have serious repercussions on the security and stability of the larger Indo-Pacific

¹The treaty came into force on 4th December 2024 when the instrument of ratification was exchanged between the two Vice Foreign Ministers of DPRK and Russia. See for details, http://www.vok.rep.kp/index.php/detail_com/comde/ien241205002/48/en accessed 07th December 2024.

²See also, "Dangerous Deal", September 18th 2023. Korean Herald. https://www.korea-herald.com/view.php?ud=20230917000223&ACE_SEARCH=1 accessed 18th September 2023

region. This is done by way of using predominantly secondary sources and documents analytically and descriptively. The article is divided into five sections. The first section provides the framework of the article discussing the concepts and theoretical arguments built in the article. The second section brings out the geopolitical predicaments of North Korea highlighting its location, size, and interplay of factors and how it plays a decisive role in constructing its relations with its neighbors. The third section analyzes the Russia – North Korea – China trilateral balancing while the fourth section analyzes North Korea's nuclear issue and security dynamics. The fifth section addresses the recent visit and its implications on the larger Indo-Pacific region. The final section provides concluding remarks.

The Framework

A central feature that has guided the close interaction between Russia and North Korea as well as China revolves around the issue of geopolitics defined by national security interests. To speak of the strategic interaction between Russia, North Korea, and China, therefore, is to take note of the geo-political issues and strategic interests that specified their relationships and hence this section of the article situates the issue of geopolitics and the concept of national interest from a theoretical lens to help understand the complexity in relations between Russia – North Korea and China trilateral and what such dynamics would tell us in terms of its implications.

Several scholars – both from ancient times to the contemporary period have talked about the importance of geopolitics determining state behaviour. Starting from India's theoretical contribution to international relations scholarship by the renowned Kautilya's *Arthashastra*³ to the much-cited works of Machiavelli's prince geographical dimensions in influencing foreign policy and national security have been pertinent. To quote the words of Machiavelli's prince (H.C. Mansfield Jr, 1985):

For the hills, the valleys, the plains, the rivers, and the marshes that are in Tuscany, for example, have a certain similarity to those of other provinces, so that from the knowledge of a site in one province one can easily come to the knowledge of others. And the prince who lacks this skill lacks the first part of what a captain must have, for this teaches him to find the enemy, seize lodgings, lead armies, order battles, and besiege towns to your advantage.

The above words of Machiavelli tell us the significance of geographical dimensions in power. Later scholars have also contributed pioneering works in this respect such as that of Mackinder to Spykman (Mackinder, H. J. , 1904) to A.T. Mahan (Cropsey, 2012) and thereafter in which the issue of geopolitics and national security has played a central role in their argument telling us the long historical connect and a very powerful theoretical proposition of geopolitics. However, a cursory glance at their works informs us of the progressive outlook in their explanation of state behavior vis-à-vis other states. In other words, there has been a perceptive change of emphasis on how they saw the interplay of geography on the politics and behaviour of states focusing from East Europe to that of littoral states of East Europe and to that of the maritime space as argued by each of them. This depicts that the theory of geopolitics

³See for example, Deepak Palande. (2019). Kautilya's *Arthashastra* and its relevance in the 21st Century. Centre for Land Warfare Studies. New Delhi.

and its application in international relations is an evolving phenomenon and it is not static rather dynamic(Sloan, 2017).⁴

An underlying factor that equally needs emphasis in the interaction between geographical considerations and national security is the concept of “national interests” brought out eloquently by several contemporary international relations scholars. Even though the perceptions of each of them - realists and liberalists and their variants alike - have differed yet they have essentially revolved around the notion of national interests only as seen from the perspective of each state actor in the international system. North Korea’s recent move to seek Russia’s partnership and the latter’s embracing of it exemplifies this dynamic of national interest defined in terms of state security.

Even though the concept of national interest is as old as the nation-state system itself, what constitutes national interests differs from state to state, so there is no universal definition that could be possible. In other words, as situations change interests of states also change and in that sense, the concept is elusive and dynamic in nature. For example, despite the changing nature of the global system trying to embrace all states into a globalized world, not all states have been able to embrace it fully owing to different factors such as capabilities and political and economic differences that are compelling enough to define their interests differently. These are the core national interests of such states and are defined in terms of ‘national security’, which is seen in terms of power and protection of sovereignty and territorial integrity. Therefore, a cooperative globe from a liberal perspective is a ‘tall order’ despite clarion calls for the same and hence it points to an inherent structural flaw in the international system that has become difficult to rectify. In that sense, the continuity in relevance of such concepts has to be accepted which the realists and their variants have long emphasized.

In particular, the neo-realist perspective vividly discussed by Kenneth Waltz in his 1979 book “The Theory of International Politics” brings forth a powerful argument(Waltz, 1979). The core argument of the theory talks about how the nature of the international system that is imbibed with varying capabilities of states as principal actors provide incentives to gain than to lose from the international system that is anarchic and hence difficult to constrain their behavior implying thereby that cooperation is highly unlikely to happen. Therefore, the inference one draws from this is that the behavior of state actors changes as and when the external situation changes, and state actors vie with each other for power to achieve their respective national interests. This is akin to the context with which this article is analyzed as discussed in the subsequent sections.

North Korea’s Geopolitical Predicaments

North Korea is located in a geo-strategically sensitive region bordering China and Russia in the north and South Korea in the South. The geopolitical predicaments of North Korea revolve around three important factors viz: its geographical location; the threat perception from South Korea and the military support of the U.S. to South Korea. Geographically speaking the border shared by North Korea with Russia is just

⁴See also, Brian W. Bluet. (2005). (ed). *Global Geostrategy: Mackinder and the Defence of the West*. London. Frank Cass.

about 19 km only and much of the remaining northern part borders China. Besides, except for South Korea which is more or less of the same size both the northern neighbours of North Korea are far bigger in size. As is known both the location and size of a country matter in how they devise strategies to conduct relations with each other and hence there is very little scope for maneuvering for North Korea but to depend largely on its northern neighbors that share the same political ideology. For good or for bad North Korea has to depend largely on either China or Russia for support – be it economic, political, or military and it is this dependency that determines the changing contours in the relationship between the three countries as and when external factors change. In other words, North Korea shares not only borders but also close historical, political, and economic ties with both China and Russia.

In this regard, the traditional animosity between North and South Korea cannot be sidelined since it is this conflictual relationship that evolved later into the nuclearization of the Korean peninsula contributing thereby to an arms race and strategic space for external actors such as the U.S. to intervene. To put this in perspective, the Korean armistice that ended the war between the North and the South in 1953 split them along the 38th parallel with the Northern side embracing socialist ideology while the South adopted a capitalist democratic system. The different political and economic outlooks that both Korea's followed since their division in 1953 led to differences in performance and development in the sense that South Korea was far ahead of North in several economic measurements providing thereby the geopolitical reality of confrontation in the form of perceiving it as an existential threat to the very survival of North Korea's authoritarian leadership who were ruling the country for long.

It is to be noted that both Korea's do not recognize each other's sovereignty and consider reunification as the only option. The Korean reunification issue is an outstanding issue that has captured the attention of the international community up until today. However, the central question would be under whose terms will that happen.⁵ And as will be discussed in subsequent sections it is along this line that the entire episode of North Korea – South Korea and China – Russia relations revolve around. This fear is expressed by Andrei Lankov who states that “unlike ruling classes in most currently existing states, the North Korean elite face a real threat state/ regime collapse and subsequent absorption by their southern neighbor”(Lankov, 2023). It's clear hence that regime security survival was considered paramount on the part of North Korea and all measures were taken to ensure that their security is achieved even if it meant defying the international community against going nuclear. The threat perception to its regime's survival runs so deep that the leadership was stubborn enough not to make any changes or reform their economic policies just as China did. North Korea successfully tested nuclear weapons in 2006 for the first time and since then it has accumulated several such weapons inviting international condemnation and undergoing severe economic sanctions that have had a devastating effect on its economy. For North Korea therefore regime security and survival at any cost seemed to be the only option. In fact, in 1995, North Korea

⁵See for an excellent analysis on North Korea foreign policy, Scott, Synder A. and Kyung-AE Park. (eds). 2023. *North Korea's Foreign Policy: The Kim Jong-Un Regime in a Hostile World*. London. Rowman & Little Field.

followed what is called as “military-first politics” aimed at deterring the U.S. and South Korea and to remain in power (Kim B., 2016).⁶ It should also be noted here that the more the North accumulated military power the more it contributed to the security dilemma for the South as well.

Besides, the presence of U.S. military troops in support of South Korea was perceived as a threat by North Korea. The split itself owed much to the involvement of the superpowers and hence the antagonism of the North Koreans over the U.S. cannot also be ignored and which continues up until this day. One can safely argue that it is this ‘commonality’ in antagonism between North Korea and Russia against the U.S. that has brought them closer together to the extent of signing the military pact this June. In this regard it is significant to point here that referring to the U.S.-led NATO invasion of Libya in 2011 that toppled the regime and killed its leader Col Muammar Gaddafi the North Korean Foreign Ministry stated as follows:

it was fully exposed before the world that “Libya’s nuclear dismantlement,” much touted by the U.S. in the past, turned out to be a mode of aggression whereby the latter coaxed the former with such sweet words as “guarantee of security” and “improvement of relations” to disarm itself and then swallowed it up by force⁷.

The above statement is indicative of the rationale that only a militarily powerful state could help achieve security objectives. Of course, there were some attempts to bring about normalization in relations between the two Koreas in the early 1990s and later as well but did not succeed. Anyhow, what is important to note is that the prevailing security situation that engulfed the Korean peninsula was compelling enough for intervention by the U.S. to extend military support to South Korea, which joined hands in opposing the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Japan which is located just across the Sea of Japan is also wary of North Korea’s strong relations with Russia. It is well known that Japan along with South Korea is opposed to both China and Russia. The whole of Korea was under Japanese control when it annexed it in 1910 up until the end of the Second World War. The Korean strategic location is aptly captured by Toyokichi Iyenaga when he said “Korea is to the Japanese Empire as a spear pointed at its heart” (Iyenaga, 1912). In fact, all three - Russia, Japan, and China – were at one point in time or another scrambling to control Korea (The World Fact Book).

It could be discerned from the above that geopolitical circumstances paved the way for North Korea to respond accordingly. The following discussion will take us further to the dynamics of the trilateral relations.

Russia – China – North Korea Trilateral Balancing

A cursory glance at the bilateral relations between Russia and North Korea as well as China in particular reveals that it has never been stable and has been characterized by shifting stance and mistrust. Hence it posits a question if the three countries would come together to balance against the existing U.S.-Japan-South Korea axis.

⁶See also, Kim, Y. (2013). North Korea’s Threat Perception and Provocation Under Kim Jong-un: The Security Dilemma and the Obsession with Political Survival. *North Korean Review*, 9(1), 6–19. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43908903> accessed 27th September 2023.

⁷“DPRK Foreign Ministry denounces U.S. military attack on Libya”, https://www.workers.org/2011/world/dprk_on_libya_0414/ accessed 25th September 2023.

This part of the section answers this in some detail.

The trilateral relations between the three countries are marked by a) a phase of high and low relationships during the Cold War owing to the Sino-Soviet split and Sino-U.S. détente b) a post-Cold War phase highlighted by the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the rise of China and c) the conflictual relationship between the U.S. on one hand and China and Russia on the other hand. The following paragraphs illustrate this albeit briefly.

To begin with Soviet Union had an important role to play in North Korean politics as the very formation of North Korea as an independent state would not have been possible but for the Soviet Union which was instrumental in supporting it against South Korea. In the words of Koh (Koh, 1969):

Saturated with Soviet institutions, practices, and ideas in its economic, political, judicial, military, and cultural spheres, North Korea on the eve of and immediately after the Korean War appeared to be a mode of Sovietized state...the Soviet Union was the principal sponsor of North Korea's war efforts and post-war reconstruction alike.

Therefore, even though the role of China was accepted there was mutual mistrust that came to the fore now and then right from the very beginning of the Korean War. However, the Sino-Soviet split followed by Sino-U.S. détente in the 1960s and early 1970s respectively provided North Korea with an opportunity to use the situation to its favor by courting one against the other. The same holds true for China too since it desired to court North Korean friendship (Dwivedi, 2012) due to its confrontation with the Soviet Union besides that of Vietnam in the late 1970s. Alexander Zhebin (Zhebin, 1995) in his persuasive article "Russia and North Korea: An Emerging Uneasy Partnership" provides a vivid analysis of the changing contours of their relationship influenced by external and internal factors. The article depicts several periods of ups and downs brought about by changing perceptions of each other combined with changing leadership styles. Be that as it may, the point to emphasize here is that the relationship among the three countries is marked by inconsistency and uneasiness so to speak.

Interesting to note in the post-Cold War era is the continuation of what defined their relationship earlier. Again, there were highs and lows the highs, in particular, could be said as during the era of Gorbachev in mid 1980s (Zhebin, 1995) and the lows could be during the early 1990s during the Presidentship of Boris Yeltsin when North Korea was sidelined and South Korean friendship and economic relations were much sought after. In other words, this shifting stance of the new Russia vying for economic tie-ups with countries of Asia-Pacific (Indo-Pacific today) and South Korea too was not liked by North Korea owing to its animosity with the South. Even if Russia – South Korea relations did not auger well in subsequent years as exemplified by its recent opposition to the Russian invasion of Ukraine the fact remains that there were geo-strategic considerations of Russia to extend its influence in the Korean peninsula in order to secure its foreign policy objectives.

One such major objective of Russia was to toe the line of China on issues relating to North Korea's nuclear weapon program supporting China's stand in forcing North Korea for denuclearization. This is again attributed to shifting geopolitical realities wherein Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 led to strained relations with the West led by the U.S., which did not recognize Russian annexation and imposed sanctions

against it. The issue of whether the Russian annexation of Crimea was due to NATO's eastward expansion after the fall of the Soviet Union or due to Russia's ambition to resuscitate the lost glory of the Soviet empire is left for everyone's introspection although Mearsheimer argues for the former (Mearsheimer, 2014).

Whatever the rationale the fact of the matter is that this development further pushed Russia to largely depend on its southern neighbor China. Besides, China's economic growth due to the economic reforms initiated by Premier Deng Xiaoping and his four-modernization programme in the late 1970s was remarkable whereas Russia's economy was stagnating.⁸ By the time of Xi Jinping's assumption to power in 2013, China was among the fastest-growing economies and has risen to be the second largest economic power today. Therefore, it was inevitable that Russia had to look to China for economic support as can be seen from the increase in trade between the two amounting to about \$190 billion in 2022 according to Global Times.⁹

Similar reasons could also be pointed out for China's move to strengthen relations with Russia. Of worth noting is the strained relations that emerged with the U.S. owing largely to multiple factors such as those mentioned by Michael D. Swaine writing about their bilateral relations at crossroads. Here again, the issue of mistrust penetrated wherein the Chinese leaders perceived a threat to party leadership ostensibly due to the U.S. role (Michael., 2019). It is after that one can see the tightening of party control taking place, particularly under Xi Jinping's tenure. Since then, both China and Russia saw each other as one opposed to Western hegemony and shared the perception that the U.S. posed a threat to their survival and therefore to seek "a more multipolar world order away from U.S. hegemony which would allow the global order to be shaped in more favorable terms to their interests" (David., 2022).

The North Korean Nuclear Issue and Security Dynamics

The nuclear weapon programme of North Korea has posed a significant concern to both China and Russia, particularly over the implications such a nuclear weapon status would have on regional security dynamics. As regards China its involvement in the Korean War in support of the North Korean forces by way of sending in Chinese volunteers was not without reason as it had a historical connection. China did not desire North Korea to fall into the hands of the colonial powers as it would undermine its security. Historically China was a regional hegemon in the East Asian region and Korea and Vietnam had a tributary relationship and acted as buffer zones for China (Xiaohe, 2018). Of course, this did not sustain for long as it fizzled out in subsequent years owing to frequent conflicts waged by external powers and those within the region such as Japan which as pointed out earlier captured and annexed the whole of Korea in 1910. There were also conflicts that China fought in its border areas with the then Soviet Union and with Vietnam and others such as India in 1962.

It is precisely this historical lesson that made China in the later years reluctant in its support to North Korea's nuclear weapon program and voted in favor of tough sanctions against it at the United Nations Security Council in 2016 (UNSC, 2016).¹⁰

⁸"What Explains the Post-Soviet Russian Economic Collapse?" <https://thewire.in/economy/post-soviet-russian-economic-collapse> accessed 27th September 2023.

⁹"Share of yuan in Russia's forex transactions hits new high amid closer bilateral cooperation". <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202308/1296008.shtml> accessed 27th September 2023.

All this was aimed at denuclearization of the Korean peninsula. Bruce Bennett opines that North Korea's nuclear weapon program "should be viewed as a double-edged sword" for China since it is both a mechanism to thwart the U.S. threat to North Korea and a mechanism to "deter even partners and superpowers like China and the U.S. respectively" (Bennett W. Bruce and Myers, 2021). In this sense, North Korea's nuclear status was perceived to undermine both China's ambition of hegemony in the region as well as its security, which in all likelihood will be posed by both external and regional powers such as the U.S. and Japan besides South Korea.¹¹ Therefore, the twin strategy for China was to curtail US influence in the region to ensure its security and to play down any assertive North Korea that could undermine its influence in the region. The only way this could be achieved as Cheng Xiaohe eloquently puts it is to rise economically which would "fundamentally reshape the power structure around the peninsula, affecting above all the position and political will of the United States" (Xiaohe, 2018). This factor explains the reluctance to see neighboring countries be it North Korea or India for that matter rise and treat them as equal partners. Therefore the ongoing participation by the North Korean special soldiers in Russia's Ukraine war reduces China's leverage over the former and hence the concern on the part of the latter is worth noting here.

For Russia too similar geopolitical concerns are visible. Its vast territory is an advantage and it envisages no direct threat from North Korea (Barannikova, 2019). Besides, the likelihood of an indirect threat due to the involvement of external powers in the region North Korea's nuclear weapon programme can serve to be advantageous for Russia in a way as "nuclear North Korea will not fall under the total influence of China and thus can serve as a buffer capable of deterring any military incursions by Beijing" (Barannikova, 2019). Therefore for Russia, a complete dependence on China is the least it desires for it gives balancing leverage even though in economic terms it does need the latter's support. This also explains precisely why Russia has taken the help of North Korea's ground support in its war against Ukraine.

As far as North Korea is concerned at least three factors determined its renewed relations with Russia. Firstly, it disliked any kind of subservient role in its relations with its other big neighbor China. As James Person writes the "Juche" or self-reliance policy of North Korea's founder leader Kim Il Sung "perceived that any attempt by China to influence North Korea's political system as an attempt to re-affirm its hegemony and make clear the hierarchy of relations in the region"¹² is an explanation as to why it attempted to ward off its dependency on China.¹³ Secondly, it seems that it was waiting for an opportunity to come out of its economic hardship due to the

¹⁰See also, "Is China Finally Fed Up With Kim Jong-un's North Korea?". Council on Foreign Relations. <https://www.cfr.org/blog/china-finally-fed-kim-jong-uns-north-korea> accessed 28th September 2023.

¹¹For a good analysis on this see, Michael D. Swaine. China's Role in North Korea Nuclear and Peace Negotiations. (2019). Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/05/06/china-s-role-in-north-korea-nuclear-and-peace-negotiations-pub-79231> accessed 28th September 2023.

¹²Cited in "North Korean Attitudes Toward China: A Historical View of Contemporary Difficulties". <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/event/north-korean-attitudes-toward-china-historical-view-contemporary-difficulties> accessed 26th September 2023. See also, Person, James. (ed). (2009). Limits of the "Lips and Teeth" Alliance: New Evidence on Sino-DPRK Relations, 1955-1984. North Korea International Documentation Project. Woodrow Wilson International Centre for Scholars. Washington D.C.

multilateral economic sanctions that were imposed on it as a punishment for its nuclear weapon programme (Frank, 2018).¹⁴

Besides, a strong relationship with Russia can provide scope for an enhanced economic opportunity which was negligible until now and mostly dependent on China only. For example, according to the UN COMTRADE database, Russian exports to North Korea in 2020 were \$ 41.95 million whereas imports from North Korea were a meager \$ 40.57 thousand only.¹⁵ And thirdly, it also sought to obtain technology for its nuclear weapon expansion programme which Russia could offer. Speaking, soon after the visit to Russia, at the 9th Session of the 14th Supreme People's Assembly (SPA) of DPRK President Kim Jong Un reiterated that:

As long as our Republic exists as a socialist state and as long as the tyrannical nuclear weapons of the imperialists trying to stamp out independence and socialism exist on the earth, we must neither change nor concede the present position of our country as a nuclear weapons state, but, on the contrary, continue to further strengthen the nuclear force. This is the serious strategic judgment made by our Party and government.¹⁶

The above statement makes clear the intentions of North Korea to fulfill its foreign policy goals of establishing security through military strength and ascertaining its independence. The first time that the present North Korean leader visited Russia was in 2019 after the summit meeting with the U.S. President in Singapore in 2018 that supposedly did not guarantee the security that North Korea wanted. The option was to initiate diplomacy with Russia besides trying to console South Korea and bargaining with the U.S. leveraging nuclear weapons for economic benefits. It was along this line that the visit to Russia and meeting with President Putin in Vladivostok in April of 2019 was undertaken to secure support for its programme as well as improve economic ties. Therefore, one can see multiple strategies that influenced the three countries' perception of each other that defined their security dynamics.

The New Defence tie-up and its implications for Indo-Pacific Region

The Russian–North Korean defense relations are traced back to 1961 when they signed the Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Assistance in which each of them pledged to support each other militarily if they are attacked. The treaty was signed between the then Soviet President Nikita Khrushchev and President of North

¹³As noted elsewhere a recent study by the Washington based Institute of War Studies also asserts that North Korea's participation in the Ukraine war on behalf of Russia helps reduce its dependency on China. See Karolina Hird, Daniel Shats, and Alison O'Neil. North Korea Joins Russia's War Against Ukraine: Operational and Strategic Implications in Ukraine and Northeast Asia. Institute for the Study of War, <https://www.understandingwar.org/background/north-korea-joins-russias-war-against-ukraine-operational-and-strategic-implications> 1 November 2024. accessed 06 December 2024

¹⁴See also, The true impact of North Korean sanctions. East Asia Forum, <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2019/07/03/the-true-impact-of-north-korean-sanctions/> accessed 28th September 2023

¹⁵<https://tradegeconomics.com/russia/imports/north-korea> accessed 30 September 2023.

¹⁶President of State Affairs Kim Jong Un makes speech at 9th Session of 14th SPA of DPRK, http://www.vok.rep.kp/index.php/revo_de/getDetail/ien230928002/en accessed 29th September 2023

Korea Kim IlSong (United Nations, 1962). This beginning continued in the later years of Kim Il Sung during which the Soviet Union supplied several military hardware such as fighter aircraft, bombers, and missiles (Joo, 2001). However, the continuity was not sustained during the days of Boris Yeltsin, as pointed out earlier but has now been revived with the visit by Putin to Pyongyang after 24 years. The main reason for the renewed focus on defense relations is the war that Russia is engaged with Ukraine in which North Korea has officially expressed its support. Besides, the strategic military alliance and the possible sale of ballistic missile technology to North Korea is an attempt by Russia to take the 'wind out of the sails' thereby a tit-for-tat to the U.S.-led Western countries' support to Ukraine. North Korea also benefits immensely as it has started receiving food aid, oil, and money from Russia and therefore supplying troops to fight along with Russia is seen as cultivating closer ties for a long time to come (Tertitskiy, 2024).

Although the stand of North Korea is obvious, yet, the timing at which this has happened gives us clues as to how this would turn the table in favor of North Korea's nuclear ambitions and its independent stand in the region to reckon with. First of all, Russia failed to predict that Ukraine would be able to launch a counter-offensive so massively upon Russian forces and inflict heavy damage. Of course, much of the laurels goes to the West led by the US and its allies including that of NATO forces whose extensive support – both morally and materially - enabled Ukraine to hit back at Russian forces. In that sense, it is to anyone's understanding that Russia is waging a war not just with Ukraine but against a whole lot of Western powers backing Ukraine's war effort and so it is not a one-to-one but one against many. Otherwise, Ukraine alone would not have been able to do this and the war would have ended by now providing scope for some other dynamics to play. But the result of such an unexpected turn of events leading to what some called a "war of attrition" has triggered a spiral of events leading to the historic visit by Kim Jong Un to Russia and the reciprocal visit by Putin to North Korea followed by lending of troops by North Korea. In any case, Russia also needs someone to support militarily and the closest reliable ally is either China or North Korea. China's official stand was to remain neutral without condemning Russia and abstain from voting against Russia in all UN resolutions that were aimed against Russia (Kaczmarek, 2022). Although Russia anticipated the moral backing of its neighbors particularly China and North Korea what it did not anticipate was the prolonged nature of the war requiring actual military hardware to continue its war.

Therefore, the Ukraine war precipitated the forging of close defense ties between Russia and North Korea. The visit by Kim Jong Un was primarily focused on Russian military arsenals located at various sites including a visit to the space station and the latest weapon systems such as warplanes, hypersonic and long-range cruise missiles, and frigates that Russia was manufacturing. Hence the possibility of selling high-tech systems to North Korea in exchange for war ammunition has been high on the agenda and it seems the return visit by Putin to Pyongyang in June 2024 has helped concretize it incentivizing North Korea to commit its troops to Russia to help fight the war against Ukraine.

The implications one can draw from the above is that the new defense relations would only add fuel to the fire by way of further complicating the security issues confronting the Indo-Pacific region. As noted earlier, the alliance will lead to prolonging the war in Ukraine by strengthening Russian defense forces. Therefore, the economic and security repercussions that are already being felt across the region

will continue to hold causing even more trouble. The other dynamics would be the much-reported formation of the Russia – China – North Korea combination as against the U.S. – South Korea – Japan axis. As it is defence cooperation between the latter three countries exists and South Korea has shown its keen interest in joining QUAD as its fifth member. The Camp David Trilateral Summit between the U.S- Japan-South Korea in August 2023 is indicative of the collective steps that these countries are attempting to forge to ensure rules-based international order(Snyder, 2023).

In this regard, China's Global Times reported that the "security and political axis in this region of the world is being built by the West rather than the East" and hence "the growing US-Japanese-South Korean military cooperation inevitably leads to stronger China-Russia-North Korea ties" contributing thereby to a more rigid "bipolar security arrangement in Northeast Asia"(Kortunov, 2023). This statement if one reads between the lines, and not just on the accusations leveled against the West, should take note of the possibility of a military alliance. By implication as Bruce Bennet at the Rand Corporation opines all three members of the trilateral partnership seek territorial gains and this opportunity will be utilized at some point in time (Bennett, 2023)thereby increasing skepticism on the possibility of war. The Taiwan crisis is already getting fragile on the one hand and the border issue with India is another probable flash point besides those that relate to conflicting claims over the South China Sea islands issue. Therefore, this can only provide incentives for an arms race in the Indo-Pacific region rather than cooperation for peace and development prospects.

The other implication will be evident when North Korea's independent assertive role in the trilateral partnership is exhibited and the possible reaction from China that would not only be counterproductive for the alliance but impact the Indo-Pacific region in one way or another. Here China's reluctance to accept a subordinate role in any such alliance should be taken note of given its regional hegemony in the past. This nature of China's behavior will certainly be amplified and outmaneuver the trilateral relationship, thereby potentially driving a wedge in the relationship. It is expected that China would want to have a larger say owing to its economic and military clout and would also desire to play a lead role in it.

Conclusion

The above analysis brings to light the dynamics of bilateral defense relations between Russia and North Korea highlighting the interplay of historical concerns and animosities exhibited by Russia, China and North Korea. As discussed, despite sharing the same ideological principles their relations have been mired by mutual suspicions and mistrust. Of course, given the national security considerations of each of them, which is paramount for all countries, they were subject to pulls and pressures borne out of a combination of domestic, geopolitical, and external factors. For North Korea in particular any threat to its regime security, which was considered to be sacrosanct, in the name of reunification under the terms of South Korea was unacceptable. Thus, military strength through nuclear weapons was perceived to be the "Brahmastra"¹⁷ to ensure its security. The pursuit towards that end affected the regional security balance and invited international sanctions against North Korea complicating the issues further. In this, the Chinese cautious approach to North

¹⁷ A Sanskrit word for a powerful weapon used in Hindu Mythology.

Korea's nuclear ambition needs to be taken note of as much as how Russia perceived it. Even then they were able to come together as later developments in the form of NATO's enlargement and Russia's military action against Ukraine helped enlist them in the form of a trilateral balance of power pitting against the U.S-Japan-South Korea axis.

To conclude, it can be said that the recent visit by North Korea to Russia to solidify defense relations and the return visit by Putin to North Korea and thereafter the recent participation of North Korean soldiers in the Ukraine war is a product of the ongoing geopolitical tussle that invariably involved all three powers viz: Russia, China (Koh, 1969) and North Korea. As it stands the involvement has given rise to a worse-off situation than otherwise; to take it forward towards any meaningful diplomatic solution to bringing peace and normalcy in the region. Hence the worse it is for the Korean peninsula the worse it is also going to be for the larger Indo-Pacific region by way of confronting a turbulent phase of security issues in the years ahead unless new developments occur in the form of change in leadership – be it in North Korea, China or Russia that would rekindle ideas to introspect towards a better, peaceful and prosperous region.

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