

**ASIA-PACIFIC LEADERSHIP NETWORK**

FOR NUCLEAR NON-PROLIFERATION AND DISARMAMENT

RUSSIA AND DPRK MUTUAL DEFENCE PACT: IMPLICATIONS FOR NORTHEAST ASIA'S REGIONAL SECURITY DYNAMICS

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A visit of the Russian President Vladimir Putin to North Korea after 24 years was in itself an important event for regional politics. Both the countries signing a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Agreement, including a Mutual Defence Pact (Article 4), however, caught even the experts by surprise. North Korea and Russia first established mutual defence relations in their 1961 Treaty of Friendship, Co-Operation and Mutual Assistance. That Treaty expired in the 1990s and was renewed in 2000 without the mutual defence clause. Even though reportedly North Korea and Russia have been providing military, scientific, and technical assistance to each other during the Ukraine War, the pact makes it more overt and it is expected that their defence cooperation between the two countries would substantially increase in the coming time.

Whereas the new mutual defence pact would come to force only when 'armed invasion from an individual state or multiple states' happens on North Korea or Russia, the pact certainly has important implications for regional security in the Asia-Pacific, particularly in Northeast Asia.

A challenge to the US-led order

South Korea's Presidential office condemned the pact as a violation of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolutions. Furthermore, South Korea said that the pact is a threat to South Korean security, and that it would have negative consequences for South Korea-Russia relations.

South Korean National Security Advisor, Chang Ho-jin also [said](#) that Seoul may reconsider the prospect of providing arms to Ukraine. So far, South Korea has provided humanitarian aid and other support to Ukraine through its western partner countries but has not directly provided arms to Ukraine. Chang's statement, however, could be just an initial reaction to the North Korea-Russia pact and Seoul may moderate its position in coming time. President Yoon Suk Yeol later made a more modest statement by saying that Russia should choose where its interests lie between the two Koreas.

While there are speculations that South Korea may refrain from directly supplying arms to Ukraine after the initial dust is settled, it seems quite likely that, with the announcement of the renewed Russia-North Korea mutual defence pact, South Korea would opt to provide more active support for Ukraine, and further align it with US, NATO, and Japan-led efforts to counter growing proximity among Russia, China, and North Korea.

Japan was also alarmed by the announcement of the pact. Earlier this year, it was reported that Prime Minister Fumio Kishida was exploring the possibility of a meeting with the North Korean leadership, but the likelihood of that will now be very low after the signing of the mutual defence pact with Russia. Japan is also likely to support, more directly, NATO's efforts in the Ukraine War, further straining its relations with Russia. On the level of public discourse in Japan and South Korea, surveys are likely to show a greater support for the acquisition of independent nuclear arsenals.

The pact symbolises greater consolidation among states challenging the US-led global order. It also means that any possibility of a preemptive attack on North Korea by the United States and its allies even in a dire situation would be out of the table for Russian involvement. It is important to remember that former [US President Donald Trump](#) and [South Korean President](#) have talked about such possibilities in the past.

In a way, the pact brings the old Cold War equations alive in Northeast Asia, when North Korea had mutual defence pacts with China and the USSR, and the United States had security alliance treaties with Japan and South Korea. How the United States responds to this development will be important. The possible response of the United States is going to be determined by the next leader who occupies the office of the President in November 2024, but it seems that Washington does not have many good options, except consolidating its alliances with Japan and South Korea and try to create a bigger network to deal with countries such as Russia, North Korea, China and Iran.

How China views the pact

China so far has not made any substantial statement on the pact. A spokesperson of the Chinese Foreign Ministry recently refused to comment on the pact, stating that it is a [matter between the two countries](#) (Russia and North Korea) and they have the '[legitimate need for exchanges, cooperation and development of relations](#)'. In this author's assessment, whereas China might see the overall Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Agreement as a welcome move by North Korea and Russia to support each other and might consider the pact as a kind of burden sharing by Russia, the Mutual Defence Pact (Article 4) and the clause on cooperation in space and peaceful nuclear technology (Article 10) may be a matter of concern for China.

China has been concerned about the North Korean nuclear and missile programs because they complicate China's security calculations, provide justification for greater US-presence in the region, as well as South Korea's and Japan's nuclear ambitions.

China was reportedly unaware about the announcement of pact and it may feel uneasy that such an important move by North Korea and Russia happened without its consultation. China may consider the pact as a Russian attempt to over-stretch itself in the Northeast Asia and a shrewd North Korean diversification strategy to have more dependable partners beyond China. China-North Korea relations do not appear as close at the moment; no senior North Korean officials attended the banquet, hosted by the Chinese embassy in Pyongyang on July 11 to commemorate the 63rd anniversary of the signing of the Sino-DPRK Treaty. Neither the DPRK nor the Chinese official media has published any related articles or news.

What's to gain for North Korea and Russia

North Korea is clearly the biggest beneficiary of the pact. It offers space for North Korea, a country which has been isolated and heavily sanctioned through the international community, to conduct its foreign policy more strategically. The pact may be an opening for North Korea to have more open economic, technological and political exchanges with not only Russia but also China, Iran, Pakistan and Belarus. When Kim Jong-un visited Russia in 2023, the Belarus President [proposed a trilateral meeting](#) between North Korea, Russia and Belarus.

Putin has expressed through the pact that he will not succumb to the West's geopolitical cornering of Russia. Even though Russian attempts in Ukraine are not getting desired success, Russia would try to challenge the US-led order through other options. Russia has approached India and even held a summit meeting with the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Russia's comparatively warm ties with India sends a clear signal that it intends to exploit all possible fissures in the US-led order, to ensure that the hard-handed approach of the Western powers do not achieve its objective.

Overall, the pact between Russia and North Korea will have deep implications, both for the East Asian region and beyond. It seems to solidify the bifurcation of the international system into opposing camps, and further reduce the space for diplomacy and cooperative security.

The opinions articulated above represent the views of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Asia-Pacific Leadership Network or any of its members.

This commentary is also published on the [APLN website](#).

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diplomatic leaders, and experts from across the Asia-Pacific region, working to address global security challenges, with a particular focus on reducing and eliminating nuclear weapons risks. The mission of APLN is to inform and stimulate debate, influence action, and propose policy recommendations designed to address regional security threats, with an emphasis on nuclear and other WMD (weapon of mass destruction) threats, and to do everything possible to achieve a world in which nuclear weapons and other WMDs are contained, diminished, and eventually eliminated.



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