



## Economic Security in Transition: *The Role of Russia-North Korea Cooperation on the Korean Peninsula*

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### Abstract

*This article examines the evolving partnership between Russia and North Korea and its implications for economic security on the Korean Peninsula. Against the backdrop of Russia's geopolitical isolation following its 2022 invasion of Ukraine, Moscow has intensified engagement with Pyongyang, culminating in the 2024 Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Treaty. This partnership expands cooperation across political, military, and economic domains, undermining international sanctions and complicating regional security dynamics. This article analyzes key areas of economic cooperation, including trade, energy, labor, infrastructure, and such emerging sectors as tourism and digital technology. It argues that although Russia's economic capacity to support North Korea remains limited compared to China's, the political and strategic significance of this partnership is considerable. North Korea gains enhanced autonomy and leverage, while Russia positions itself as a spoiler in US-led containment efforts. Importantly, the partnership is not one-sided: North Korea has also supplied Russia with munitions and possible personnel support, underscoring its reciprocal nature. This study concludes by assessing the policy challenges facing South Korea and its allies, emphasizing the need for stronger trilateral security cooperation, expanded diplomatic outreach, and a balanced strategy that preserves future pathways for dialogue and engagement.*

**Keywords:** Russia-North Korea relations, international sanctions, strategic autonomy, Northeast Asian security, Russia's pivot to Asia, energy security

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## **Introduction**

The shifting geopolitical landscape in Northeast Asia presents new challenges and opportunities for economic security on the Korean Peninsula. While scholarly attention has often focused on the strategic rivalry between the United States and China, an increasingly consequential but less explored development is the evolving relationship between Russia and North Korea. Historically rooted in Cold War alliances, this relationship weakened following the collapse of the Soviet Union. However, recent events—including Russia’s deepening isolation from the West after its 2022 invasion of Ukraine and North Korea’s continued pursuit of nuclear weapons—have brought Moscow and Pyongyang into closer alignment. The signing of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Treaty in June 2024 marks the formalization of this partnership across political, military, and economic domains (Howell 2024).

North Korea’s strategic dependence on China has been a defining feature of its post-Cold War foreign policy. Since the imposition of United Nations Security Council (UNSC) sanctions in 2016, China has accounted for more than 90 percent of North Korea’s officially reported trade (Ernst and Kim 2020, 30). This overwhelming dependency illustrates how Pyongyang’s foreign economic ties have been reshaped under pressure, with Seoul facing the dilemma of balancing between great powers while nurturing its middle power identity (Rubiolo and Aguirre 2023, 445). The US-China-Russia strategic triangle has re-emerged as a decisive framework for understanding power realignments in East Asia (Rozman 2022, 15). China’s policy toward the Korean Peninsula has also been described as a strategic gambit aimed at leveraging North Korea to counterbalance US influence (Pak 2020, 12).

Russia’s motivations for re-engaging with North Korea are equally complex. Following its annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the imposition of Western sanctions, Russia launched its so-called “pivot to the East,” seeking to expand its influence in Asia and reduce its economic dependence on Europe (Lukin 2022, 140). The outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine war in 2022 intensified Moscow’s search for alternative partners willing to challenge

the US-led international order. North Korea, already marginalized by international sanctions, emerged as a natural partner in this context. Both regimes share an interest in resisting Western pressure, sustaining their strategic autonomy, and securing economic and military support from like-minded states (Wishnick 2025).

The 2024 Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Treaty between Russia and North Korea represents the most significant institutional upgrade in their bilateral relations since the end of the Cold War. Although initial reports suggested that the full text of the treaty had not been released, the agreement was subsequently published in its entirety by both North Korean state media (*Rodong sinmun*) and the Russian government's official legal portal. The published text confirms expanded cooperation in areas ranging from energy and transportation to military technology and diplomatic coordination (Cha and Kim 2024). This partnership has raised concerns among policymakers and scholars about its implications for regional security, the enforcement of international sanctions, and the balance of power on the Korean Peninsula (Howell 2024).

One of the most immediate impacts of the Russia-North Korea alignment is the erosion of the international sanctions regime. Russia's increased shipments of oil and coal to North Korea, along with its facilitation of labor exports and other illicit economic activities, undermine UNSC resolutions aimed at curbing Pyongyang's access to critical resources (Jankowicz 2024; Zakharova 2016). Moreover, Moscow's diplomatic protection at the United Nations has weakened the international community's ability to apply coordinated pressure on North Korea, reducing the effectiveness of sanctions as a tool for denuclearization and regional stability (D. Cha 2024).

In addition to economic and diplomatic cooperation, the military dimension of the partnership poses significant challenges for South Korea and its allies. Reports of Russian-North Korean defense consultations, potential arms transfers, and joint military activities suggest a deepening alignment that could escalate tensions on the Korean Peninsula (Cha and Kim 2024; Aoki 2025). These developments complicate the strategic calculations of the United States, Japan, and South Korea, raising the risk of

great-power confrontation in Northeast Asia.

Against this backdrop, this study seeks to address three interrelated research questions. First, what are the structural drivers behind Russia-North Korea economic and military cooperation? Second, how does this partnership affect the enforcement of international sanctions and the broader economic security environment on the Korean Peninsula? Third, what are the policy implications for South Korea as it navigates these evolving dynamics?

To answer these questions, the article adopts a qualitative case study approach, drawing on government statements, expert analyses, and scholarly research. Existing literature has extensively examined North Korea's dependence on China (Haggard and Noland 2017; Smith 2015) and the limitations of international sanctions (Snyder 2021; Ernst and Kim 2020). However, few studies have systematically analyzed the role of Russia as a secondary but increasingly significant actor in shaping North Korea's strategic behavior and the region's economic security architecture.

The article is structured as follows. The following section provides a historical overview of Russia-North Korea relations, tracing their evolution from Cold War alliance to post-Soviet disengagement and recent strategic realignment. Next, it analyzes the current state of economic cooperation between the two countries, focusing on trade, energy, labor, and infrastructure projects. It then examines the implications of this partnership for economic security on the Korean Peninsula, particularly in relation to sanctions enforcement and regional stability. Finally, it offers conclusions and policy recommendations for South Korea and its allies.

By situating Russia-North Korea cooperation within the broader geopolitical context of Northeast Asia, this study aims to fill a critical gap in the literature. Understanding how this partnership undermines existing sanctions, reshapes inter-Korean relations, and influences South Korea's strategic options is essential for policymakers seeking to promote peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula.

## The Strategic Realignment of Russia-North Korea Relations

### *From Alliance to Disengagement: The Historical Trajectory of Russia-North Korea Relations*

The roots of Russia-North Korea relations can be traced to the final phase of World War II when Soviet forces entered the Korean Peninsula, occupying the area north of the 38th parallel. The Soviet Union played a decisive role in establishing the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) in 1948, supporting Kim Il-sung's leadership as part of its broader strategy to expand socialist influence in East Asia (Lankov 2020, 45). During the Korean War (1950–1953), the Soviet Union provided North Korea with military equipment, training, and strategic guidance, although it stopped short of deploying its own troops to avoid direct conflict with the United States and its allies (Westad 1998, 112–115). Despite repeated downturns, Moscow and Pyongyang have periodically restored ties to pursue shared strategic interests (Toloraya and Yakovleva 2021). Under Kim Jong-un, North Korea's foreign policy has become more opportunistic and survival-oriented, as demonstrated in recent scholarship (Snyder and Park 2022).

Throughout the Cold War, the Soviet Union remained North Korea's most important economic and military benefactor. Soviet support included the supply of oil, machinery, industrial equipment, and food, all provided at heavily subsidized rates. This assistance was essential for the development of North Korea's industrial economy and military capacity. Despite this reliance, Pyongyang maintained a careful balancing act, promoting its Juche (self-reliance) ideology to avoid overdependence on either Moscow or Beijing. The Sino-Soviet split of the 1960s allowed North Korea to extract concessions from both powers while maintaining its strategic autonomy (Smith 2015, 78).

The relationship began to shift in the late 1980s as Mikhail Gorbachev's reformist policies prioritized improved relations with South Korea and the West. The Soviet Union's establishment of diplomatic ties with South Korea in 1990 was perceived in Pyongyang as a significant betrayal (Fedorovsky 1999). The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 further disrupted

bilateral relations. The new Russian Federation, under President Boris Yeltsin, abandoned its ideological commitment to socialism and prioritized economic reforms and Western integration. Moscow ended the practice of subsidized trade, demanding hard currency payments for oil and other goods. This abrupt shift left North Korea without its primary economic lifeline, contributing to the country's descent into famine and economic collapse during the mid-1990s, a period known as the "Arduous March" (Haggard and Noland 2017, 115).

Despite these setbacks, Russia did not sever diplomatic ties with North Korea. Sporadic high-level meetings continued, and both countries expressed interest in revitalizing economic cooperation. One of the most notable initiatives was the Rajin-Khasan railway project launched in the late 2000s. This project aimed to connect Russia's Trans-Siberian Railway to North Korea's northeastern port of Rajin, facilitating the export of Russian coal and other goods to East Asian markets (Toloraya 2014, 2). However, the project failed to achieve meaningful economic impact due to geopolitical instability, North Korea's nuclear provocations, and the tightening of international sanctions (D. Kim 2021).

By the mid-2010s, North Korea had become almost entirely dependent on China for its economic survival. China accounted for over 90 percent of North Korea's official trade, supplying essential goods such as food, fuel, and consumer products while serving as Pyongyang's main diplomatic shield at the United Nations (Ernst and Kim 2020, 10). Russia, while maintaining formal diplomatic relations, played a relatively minor role in North Korea's economic and strategic calculations.

The geopolitical landscape shifted again following Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014. Facing economic sanctions and diplomatic isolation from the West, Russia announced a strategic "pivot to the East," seeking to strengthen ties with non-Western partners, including North Korea (Lukin 2022, 140). Pyongyang, already marginalized by international sanctions, viewed renewed engagement with Moscow as an opportunity to diversify its diplomatic and economic partnerships. High-level exchanges resumed, and discussions on infrastructure and energy cooperation gained momentum.

The outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine war in 2022 accelerated this

process. Both Russia and North Korea, facing escalating sanctions and diplomatic isolation, found common ground in opposing what they framed as Western “imperialism” and “economic coercion.” Russian and North Korean state media emphasized their shared commitment to resisting Western pressure, framing their relationship as part of a broader struggle against US-led global dominance.<sup>1</sup> This strategic convergence laid the groundwork for the signing of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Treaty in 2024, marking the formal renewal of a relationship that had experienced decades of decline and stagnation.

*Russia's Strategic Re-engagement: From Crimea to the 2024 Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Treaty*

Russia's strategic re-engagement with North Korea did not happen overnight. Rather, it was the result of a gradual reassessment of Moscow's foreign policy priorities following its geopolitical setbacks in Europe. The turning point came with Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the subsequent imposition of extensive economic sanctions by the United States and the European Union. Confronted with diplomatic isolation and economic pressure, Moscow adopted a strategic “pivot to the East,” seeking to expand its influence in Asia and reduce its dependence on European markets (Lukin 2022, 140).

In this context, North Korea emerged as a natural, though high-risk, partner. Pyongyang's own isolation due to its nuclear and missile programs made it a suitable ally in Russia's broader strategy to challenge US-led global norms. From the mid-2010s, Russia began reviving diplomatic and economic ties with North Korea, including discussions on infrastructure projects like the Rajin-Khasan railway and increased high-level political exchanges (Toloraya 2014). These efforts, however, remained limited in scope, as Russia sought to balance its outreach to Pyongyang with its interests in maintaining stable relations with South Korea and China.

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1. Both Russian and North Korean official statements have emphasized their partnership as a united front against Western sanctions and strategic encirclement.

The outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine war in 2022 dramatically accelerated this re-engagement. Facing unprecedented levels of Western sanctions and diplomatic exclusion, Russia deepened its search for alternative partners that shared its interest in resisting US influence. North Korea, already one of the most heavily sanctioned countries in the world, welcomed Russia's overtures as an opportunity to diversify its external support beyond China (Zakharova 2016).

High-level diplomatic exchanges intensified, culminating in the signing of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Treaty in June 2024. This treaty, framed by both governments as a response to escalating Western *imperialism*, marked the most significant formalization of their bilateral relations since the end of the Cold War (Cha and Kim 2024). While the full text of the treaty was undisclosed at the time of signing, official statements highlighted several key areas of cooperation.

First, the treaty institutionalized regular high-level political consultations, committing both sides to coordinate their responses to perceived external threats. This included unspecified mechanisms for diplomatic and military collaboration, raising concerns among regional actors about potential military technology transfers and joint defense initiatives (Cha and Kim 2024). Second, the treaty expanded economic cooperation, with Russia pledging to increase exports of energy products, including oil and coal, as well as industrial materials and agricultural goods. Infrastructure projects, such as the revitalization of the Rajin-Khasan logistics corridor, were also highlighted as priority areas for joint development.

Perhaps most controversially, the treaty appears to have formalized labor cooperation, allowing North Korean workers to continue operating in Russia under various legal and informal arrangements, despite United Nations Security Council Resolution 2397, which requires their repatriation (Jankowicz 2024). This provision provides Pyongyang with a crucial source of foreign currency, while offering Russia a supply of low-cost, disciplined labor.

The treaty's broader significance lies in its geopolitical messaging. By publicly aligning with North Korea, Russia signaled its willingness to



challenge the international sanctions regime and expand its influence in Northeast Asia. Both Moscow and Pyongyang framed their partnership as part of a larger struggle against US hegemony and the Western-led international order. This positioning not only complicates regional security dynamics but also undermines the credibility of international efforts to isolate North Korea diplomatically and economically.

*Regional Repercussions and the Emerging Northeast Asian Security Landscape*

The formalization of the Russia-North Korea Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in 2024 marked a major shift in Northeast Asia's geopolitical dynamics, generating immediate concern among regional and global actors. While Moscow and Pyongyang presented the treaty as a sovereign right to deepen bilateral relations, many neighboring states and Western powers viewed it as a direct challenge to the rules-based international order and a destabilizing force on the Korean Peninsula (Howell 2024).

One of the most immediate consequences of this alignment has been the weakening of the international sanctions regime against North Korea. Since 2016, United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolutions have imposed strict limitations on North Korea's access to energy, foreign currency, and military technology in an effort to curb its nuclear and missile programs (Haggard and Noland 2017). However, Russia's increased shipments of oil, coal, and agricultural goods to North Korea—often through covert methods such as ship-to-ship transfers—have directly undermined these sanctions (Jankowicz 2024). Moscow's acceptance of North Korean laborers under various legal loopholes further sustains Pyongyang's foreign currency earnings, despite the formal ban on such activities under UNSC Resolution 2397 (Reuters 2024).

China's response to Russia's expanding role in Pyongyang has been notably cautious. While Beijing shares Russia's interest in countering US influence in East Asia, it is wary of Moscow encroaching on what it traditionally considers its sphere of influence on the Korean Peninsula (Rinna 2024). Analysts suggest that the Russia-North Korea partnership may introduce a new layer of strategic competition between Beijing and Moscow

for influence over Pyongyang (Rinna 2024). This dynamic complicates China's diplomatic balancing act, as it seeks to maintain stability on the peninsula without appearing to cede ground to Russia.<sup>2</sup>

The United States and its regional allies, particularly South Korea and Japan, have expressed alarm over the potential military dimensions of the Russia-North Korea partnership. While official details remain scarce, there are growing concerns that Russia may provide North Korea with advanced military technologies or logistical support that could enhance Pyongyang's missile and nuclear capabilities (Cha and Kim 2024). Such cooperation would not only violate international sanctions but also increase the risk of military escalation on the Korean Peninsula.

South Korea faces particularly acute challenges in this evolving landscape. The erosion of the sanctions regime and Russia's diplomatic backing of North Korea diminish Seoul's leverage in inter-Korean relations. Moreover, the deepening Russia-North Korea alignment complicates South Korea's security calculations, as it now faces the prospect of coordinated actions by two neighboring powers hostile to US regional influence. In response, South Korea has accelerated efforts to strengthen trilateral security cooperation with the United States and Japan, including joint military exercises, intelligence sharing, and missile defense integration (Snyder 2021).

In this context, the 2024 Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between Russia and North Korea represents more than just a bilateral agreement. It symbolizes a broader geopolitical realignment that challenges existing security frameworks and diplomatic strategies in Northeast Asia. The partnership undermines sanctions enforcement, introduces new great-power rivalries, and raises the stakes for regional stability.

Moving forward, managing the repercussions of this alignment will require coordinated efforts among the United States, South Korea, Japan, and other regional stakeholders. Diplomatic engagement with China and

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2. Chinese analysts have raised concerns that Russia's growing influence over Pyongyang could undermine Beijing's long-term strategic position on the Korean Peninsula (Rinna 2024).

Russia remains necessary to prevent further escalation, but the path forward is fraught with uncertainty. As the strategic landscape continues to evolve, the international community must adapt its policies to address the emerging challenges posed by the Russia-North Korea partnership.

## **Current Economic Cooperation Between Russia and North Korea**

### *Trade Relations: Current Status and Comparison with China*

North Korea's external trade structure has long been marked by extreme asymmetry, with China occupying an overwhelmingly dominant position. In the years following the tightening of United Nations Security Council (UNSC) sanctions in 2016, China has accounted for over 90 percent of North Korea's officially recorded external trade (Ernst and Kim 2020, 32). Beijing's role has been pivotal in supplying Pyongyang with essential goods, including food, fuel, industrial equipment, and consumer products. This dependency has provided China with considerable political leverage over North Korea, positioning Beijing as both Pyongyang's principal economic patron and diplomatic protector in the international community (Snyder 2021).

In contrast, Russia has traditionally played a marginal role in North Korea's trade landscape. Throughout the 2000s and 2010s, Russia-North Korea trade volumes rarely surpassed a few hundred million US dollars per year. Russian exports to North Korea mainly included petroleum products, coal, and industrial materials, while imports from North Korea consisted of seafood, textiles, and minerals (Zakharova 2016, 7). Despite diplomatic efforts to expand economic ties, including through the Rajin-Khasan railway project aimed at connecting Russia's Trans-Siberian Railway with North Korea's northeastern port of Rajin (Toloraya 2014), these initiatives produced limited tangible outcomes. Russia's economic engagement remained secondary to China's overwhelming dominance.

However, the geopolitical landscape began to shift following Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine and the subsequent imposition of comprehensive

Western sanctions. Facing isolation from Western markets, Russia accelerated efforts to deepen economic partnerships with non-Western and sanctioned states, including North Korea (Lukin 2022). Pyongyang, for its part, saw an opportunity to diversify its economic relations and reduce its near-total reliance on China (Wishnick 2025).

Since 2023, there have been multiple reports of increased economic exchanges between Russia and North Korea, particularly in the energy sector. Russia has reportedly expanded shipments of crude oil and refined petroleum products to North Korea, despite United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 2397 (2017), which permits North Korea to import up to 4 million barrels of crude oil and 500,000 barrels of refined petroleum products annually. Satellite imagery and maritime tracking have revealed a notable uptick in ship-to-ship oil transfers between Russian and North Korean vessels in the East Sea (Sea of Japan), circumventing international monitoring and enforcement mechanisms (Jankowicz 2024; *Reuters* 2024). These shipments are vital for sustaining North Korea's transportation, industrial operations, and military readiness.

Beyond energy, agricultural trade between the two countries has also shown signs of growth. North Korea has long suffered from chronic food shortages, exacerbated by poor agricultural productivity and vulnerability to climate change (Smith 2015, 98). While recent reports indicate improvements in grain production and modest recovery (KCNA 2023; FAO 2024), structural vulnerabilities persist, particularly in terms of distributional inefficiencies and dependence on external inputs. At the December 2023 plenary session of the Workers' Party, Kim Jong-un emphasized that annual grain output had reached approximately 5 million metric tons, calling it a "satisfactory achievement" (KCNA 2023). International monitoring agencies likewise observed modest improvements in staple grain production compared to the late 2010s, though they cautioned that such gains remain fragile and uneven (FAO 2024, 11). Russia's provision of wheat and fertilizer since 2023 has therefore played an important role in buffering against potential crises, but the country's food security still reflects a precarious balance between external assistance and limited domestic recovery. Russia has stepped in to supply wheat, fertilizer, and other agricultural products, providing Pyongyang

with an alternative to Chinese imports. While the scale of these agricultural exchanges remains modest compared to China's contributions, they represent a strategic diversification of North Korea's external economic partnerships.

Despite these developments, China's dominance in North Korea's trade remains virtually unchallenged. In 2024, Chinese exports to North Korea totaled approximately USD 2.64 billion, vastly outpacing Russian trade volumes (KOTRA 2025). Logistical challenges, including limited transportation infrastructure, sanctions compliance risks, and the underdeveloped capacity of North Korean ports and railways, continue to constrain Russia-North Korea trade expansion.

Nevertheless, the political and strategic implications of Russia's growing economic engagement with North Korea are significant. By diversifying its economic partnerships, Pyongyang seeks to strengthen its bargaining position vis-à-vis Beijing, Washington, and Seoul. Russia's willingness to defy international sanctions and sustain economic exchanges with North Korea undermines the credibility of the sanctions regime and complicates global efforts to pressure Pyongyang into denuclearization and compliance with international norms (Cha 2024).

Available data, though fragmentary, provides clearer insight into the scale of these exchanges. According to satellite monitoring and maritime tracking, ship-to-ship transfers between Russian and North Korean vessels increased markedly in 2023–2024, with estimates suggesting deliveries surpassing the annual cap of 500,000 barrels of refined petroleum set by UNSC Resolution 2397 (*Reuters* 2024; Jankowicz 2024). In terms of trade flows, Chinese customs data indicate that North Korea imported approximately USD 2.64 billion worth of goods from China in 2024, compared to an estimated USD 250–300 million in exchanges with Russia (KOTRA 2025, 14–18). These figures underscore both the continuing dominance of China and the incremental rise of Russia as a supplemental partner. Financial indicators provide additional context: North Korea's unofficial market exchange rate for the *won* against the US dollar has risen sharply since 2022, from around KPW 5,000 per USD to over KPW 15,000 by mid-2024, suggesting persistent currency strain despite inflows of Russian oil and foodstuffs (*Daily NK* 2024). Such quantitative evidence

illustrates the complex but limited economic cushioning effect that Russia provides to North Korea.

### *Energy Cooperation: Oil, Coal, Electricity, and Pipeline Prospects*

Energy cooperation between Russia and North Korea has emerged as one of the most significant elements of their deepening bilateral relationship. North Korea's chronic energy shortages have long undermined its economic development and military readiness. Historically, Pyongyang relied on subsidized energy supplies from the Soviet Union. However, this lifeline was severed after the Soviet collapse in 1991, forcing North Korea to turn almost exclusively to China for crude oil and refined petroleum products delivered through the Dandong-Sinuiju pipeline (Haggard and Noland 2017, 140). This dependency made Pyongyang vulnerable to Beijing's political and economic pressures, but Russia's recent willingness to expand energy cooperation represents a strategic shift that reduces Pyongyang's reliance on Chinese supplies.

Coal is another critical component of Russia-North Korea energy cooperation. North Korea possesses abundant coal reserves, and coal has historically been one of the country's most important export commodities. However, UNSC sanctions imposed in 2017 banned North Korean coal exports in an effort to cut off a key revenue source for the regime's nuclear and missile programs. Despite these restrictions, reports suggest that North Korean coal continues to reach international markets via Russian ports, where it is relabeled as Russian-origin coal (Zakharova 2016). This practice not only undermines the sanctions regime but also sustains North Korea's export earnings.

Beyond oil and coal, Russia has proposed expanding electricity cooperation with North Korea. One such proposal involves connecting North Korea's northeastern regions to Russia's Far Eastern power grid. This project, if realized, could provide electricity to energy-starved areas of North Korea, particularly in the Rason Special Economic Zone. However, significant obstacles remain, including North Korea's outdated power infrastructure, financial constraints, and the risk of violating international

sanctions (Rinna 2024). As a result, electricity cooperation remains largely aspirational.

The most ambitious, though still unrealized, project in the energy sector is the proposed construction of trans-Korean pipelines. These pipelines would transport Russian natural gas and oil through North Korea to South Korea, offering economic and strategic benefits to all parties involved. Such a project has been periodically discussed since the early 2000s as a means of enhancing energy security in Northeast Asia while generating transit revenues for Pyongyang (Lankov 2024). Proponents argue that the pipelines could foster inter-Korean economic cooperation and reduce energy costs for both Koreas. However, political tensions on the Korean Peninsula, coupled with international sanctions and security concerns over North Korea's nuclear ambitions, have prevented the project from advancing beyond preliminary discussions.

Despite these challenges, Russia's expanding role as a provider of energy resources to North Korea has already had tangible effects. By supplying oil, coal, and potentially electricity, Russia helps Pyongyang mitigate the impact of international sanctions and reduces its dependency on China. This cooperation not only strengthens North Korea's economic resilience but also complicates the international community's efforts to pressure the regime through energy-related sanctions.

#### *Labor and Human Resource Exchanges: Legal Loopholes and Sanctions Evasion*

North Korea's export of labor has historically been one of its most effective means of generating foreign currency. Russia, particularly its Far Eastern regions, has served as one of the largest destinations for North Korean workers. Before the adoption of United UNSC Resolution 2397 in 2017, estimates suggested that as many as 50,000 North Korean laborers were working in Russia, primarily in construction, logging, and agriculture (Zakharova 2016). These workers typically operated under state-managed contracts, with a substantial portion of their earnings remitted to the North Korean government, while retaining a limited share for their own use

(Haggard and Noland 2017, 135–136).

UNSC Resolution 2397 required all member states to repatriate North Korean workers by December 2019 to cut off this revenue stream. While Russia officially claimed compliance, multiple reports have indicated that North Korean laborers remained in Russia under alternative visa arrangements, such as student or private contractor visas, effectively circumventing the sanctions (Jankowicz 2024). This legal maneuvering has allowed both governments to continue benefiting from labor exchanges while maintaining the appearance of technical compliance with UNSC resolutions.

Following the 2024 Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Treaty, Russia and North Korea have signaled intentions to formalize and expand labor cooperation once again (Cha and Kim 2024). Russian companies, particularly in sparsely populated regions of the Far East, face chronic labor shortages. North Korean workers, known for their discipline and low wage expectations, are considered highly attractive to these industries. As a result, Russian authorities appear willing to tolerate, or even facilitate, the continued presence of North Korean laborers despite the international legal restrictions.

For North Korea, labor exports remain a vital source of foreign currency, which is used to finance the regime's strategic programs, including its nuclear and missile development. However, the working conditions for these laborers are notoriously poor. Human rights organizations have documented extensive abuses, including long working hours, lack of freedom of movement, and the confiscation of wages by North Korean security agents who monitor workers abroad (Haggard and Noland 2017, 135–136). These practices have led many international observers to classify North Korea's overseas labor system as a form of state-sponsored forced labor.

The continuation of labor exchanges between Russia and North Korea exemplifies the broader limitations of the international sanctions regime. By exploiting legal ambiguities and informal arrangements, both governments have maintained economic activities that sustain the North Korean regime. This cooperation not only undermines the credibility of UNSC sanctions but



also raises serious ethical and legal concerns about human rights violations and the exploitation of vulnerable workers.

### *Infrastructure and Transportation Projects: Rajin-Khasan and Beyond*

Infrastructure development has long been identified as a promising area of Russia-North Korea economic cooperation. Among various initiatives, the Rajin-Khasan logistics project stands out as the most advanced attempt to integrate North Korea into Eurasian transport networks. Originally launched in the late 2000s, the project aimed to link Russia's Trans-Siberian Railway with North Korea's northeastern port of Rajin, creating a logistics corridor that could facilitate Russian coal and other exports to East Asian markets (Toloraya 2014).

The project involved rehabilitating a 54-kilometer railway between Khasan in Russia and Rajin in North Korea and modernizing Rajin port facilities. A joint venture between Russian Railways and North Korean authorities managed the operation, with initial pilot shipments, including South Korean participation, carried out in the mid-2010s (Zakharova 2016). However, South Korea suspended its involvement in 2016 following North Korea's nuclear tests, and the project was subsequently scaled back due to tightening international sanctions (Cha and Kim 2024).<sup>3</sup>

Despite these setbacks, Russia has continued to promote the corridor. Following the 2024 Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Treaty, Russian officials announced plans to expand cargo shipments through Rajin, targeting fertilizers, metals, and industrial materials (Rinna 2024). This reflects Moscow's broader strategy to leverage North Korea's geographic position to bypass maritime chokepoints and reduce dependency on vulnerable shipping routes.

In addition to Rajin-Khasan, Russia has proposed expanding railway connections deeper into North Korea and modernizing other ports along the East Sea. These projects are framed as part of Russia's efforts to link

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3. The Rajin-Khasan project, despite initial South Korean participation, stalled after Seoul withdrew in 2016 due to North Korea's nuclear provocations and escalating sanctions.

North Korea to the Eurasian Economic Union and potentially to China's Belt and Road Initiative (Lankov 2024), but their implementation is hampered by financing difficulties, the lack of modern technology, and the heightened political risks for potential partners under UNSC sanctions.

The most ambitious yet unrealized proposal is the Trans-Korean Railway, which would connect South Korea's rail network to Russia's Trans-Siberian Railway via North Korea. This project has long been envisioned as a transformative economic corridor that could reduce shipping times between East Asia and Europe and generate transit revenues for North Korea (Lankov 2024). However, persistent political tensions on the Korean Peninsula, North Korea's nuclear ambitions, and the complex web of international sanctions have prevented the project from advancing beyond the conceptual stage.

Despite these challenges, infrastructure cooperation continues to serve Russia's strategic interests. By keeping the Rajin-Khasan corridor operational at a minimal level, Moscow maintains its presence in North Korea's transport sector, positioning itself as a stakeholder in future regional integration efforts. For Pyongyang, these projects offer diplomatic and economic opportunities to counterbalance its dependence on China and signal its willingness to engage with other partners, even if on a limited scale.

In practice, however, the gap between announced plans and actual outcomes remains wide. While Russian and North Korean officials frequently highlight infrastructure projects as key pillars of their bilateral cooperation, the impact on North Korea's economy and regional connectivity has been modest. The combination of geopolitical instability, sanctions enforcement, and logistical bottlenecks continues to hinder meaningful progress.

Beyond the Rajin-Khasan corridor, more recent infrastructure initiatives illustrate the evolving scope of Russia-North Korea cooperation. In April 2025, both countries officially began construction of a new road bridge across the Tumen River, with Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin characterizing the project as a "significant milestone" in bilateral relations (Sokolin 2025). Analysis of satellite imagery further revealed active construction preparations on both sides of the border, including grading and foundation work (Beyond Parallel 2025). These developments underscore

the importance of diversified logistics channels, supplementing rail with road infrastructure to bolster bilateral trade under sanctions and improve cross-border connectivity, while also signaling Russia's pragmatic investment in infrastructure that supports North Korea's economic resilience despite persistent international restrictions.

### *Emerging Areas: Tourism, Agriculture, and Digital Cooperation*

While energy, trade, labor, and infrastructure dominate Russia-North Korea economic cooperation, both countries have begun exploring emerging sectors that, while currently limited in scale, offer alternative avenues for expanding their relationship. Among these are tourism, agriculture, and digital technology—areas that reflect the strategic diversification efforts of Moscow and Pyongyang as they seek to deepen their alignment in the face of growing international isolation.

Tourism has gained renewed attention as one of the few sectors not directly restricted by UNSC sanctions. Historically, Russian tourists have participated in state-monitored visits to North Korea, traveling to destinations such as Pyongyang, Mount Paektu, and the Rason Special Economic Zone (Rinna 2024). Following the 2024 Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Treaty, both governments announced plans to expand tourism exchanges, including new charter flights between Vladivostok and Pyongyang and the development of joint tourism zones near the Tumen River (Kim and Heintz 2024). These initiatives are designed to generate foreign currency for Pyongyang while offering Moscow an avenue to strengthen people-to-people ties. However, North Korea's inadequate tourism infrastructure, restrictive policies, and international reputational risks significantly limit the sector's growth potential.

Agriculture presents another area where cooperation has modestly expanded. North Korea continues to suffer from chronic food shortages exacerbated by poor agricultural productivity and extreme weather events. Russia has increased wheat and fertilizer shipments since 2023, providing a critical buffer against potential food crises in North Korea (Reuters 2024). In addition to supplying agricultural inputs, discussions have included joint

farming ventures in North Korea's underutilized border regions. Russian firms have expressed interest in investing in North Korean farmland to introduce modern farming techniques and boost output (Zakharova 2016). However, North Korea's state-controlled agricultural system, logistical shortcomings, and sanctions-related financial risks make large-scale projects difficult to implement. Despite these obstacles, agricultural cooperation remains politically attractive for both regimes as a way to demonstrate mutual support without direct military or strategic entanglements.

Perhaps the most speculative, yet strategically significant, area of cooperation lies in digital technology and cybersecurity. Both Russia and North Korea have developed advanced cyber capabilities, including expertise in hacking, information control, and financial cybercrimes. Analysts warn that the two countries may collaborate on cyber operations aimed at undermining Western interests, including financial institutions and critical infrastructure (Cha and Kim 2024). Russia's increasing technological isolation due to Western sanctions has raised the possibility of joint ventures with North Korean IT specialists, particularly in blockchain development, encrypted communications, and software engineering (Lankov 2024). While such cooperation remains largely unconfirmed, its potential to further destabilize international cybersecurity norms has attracted the attention of Western governments and security analysts.

Together, these emerging areas—tourism, agriculture, and digital technology—illustrate the strategic creativity both Moscow and Pyongyang are applying to expand their partnership beyond traditional economic and military domains. While none of these sectors currently rivals energy or trade in scale or impact, they provide both countries with politically manageable ways to deepen their ties. For North Korea, these sectors offer additional avenues to generate revenue and reduce overdependence on China. For Russia, they represent low-cost opportunities to strengthen its presence on the Korean Peninsula while signaling defiance of Western sanctions.

Nevertheless, the structural barriers to meaningful expansion in these sectors remain high. North Korea's systemic inefficiencies, international sanctions, and geopolitical isolation limit the scalability of tourism and

agriculture, while digital cooperation risks further diplomatic fallout. Despite these constraints, the political symbolism of pursuing cooperation in these areas reinforces the broader message that Russia and North Korea are committed to diversifying and strengthening their partnership, regardless of international opposition.

While most analyses emphasize what Russia supplies to North Korea, the reverse dimension of this partnership is equally consequential. Multiple reports indicate that Pyongyang has exported artillery shells, rockets, and other munitions to Russia for use in the war in Ukraine, with some estimates placing shipments in the hundreds of thousands of rounds by late 2024 (Aoki 2025). Beyond materiel, intelligence assessments suggest that North Korea may have dispatched military personnel in support roles, further blurring the line between economic transaction and security alignment (Cha and Kim 2024). These transfers provide Pyongyang with hard currency revenues and food supplies in return, linking its military-industrial sector to immediate regime survival needs. At the same time, domestic policies such as Kim Jong-un's "20×10 regional development program," aimed at channeling resources into local economies, reflect the regime's effort to manage internal stability amid heightened external military cooperation (KCNA 2023). Recognizing these reciprocal exchanges highlights that the Russia-North Korea axis is not a one-sided patron-client relationship but rather a transactional partnership shaped by urgent wartime demands.

## **Implications for Economic Security on the Korean Peninsula**

### *The Undermining of International Sanctions and Its Regional Repercussions*

Since 2016, the UNSC has maintained a robust sanctions regime against North Korea, aiming to restrict its access to revenue streams that could support its nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programs. These sanctions have included bans on coal, iron, seafood, textiles, and labor exports, as well as severe limitations on refined petroleum imports (Haggard and Noland 2017). For several years, these measures effectively isolated North Korea

from much of the global economy, forcing Pyongyang to depend almost entirely on China for trade and diplomatic cover (B. Kim 2017; Ernst and Kim 2020). China's role has been described as a strategic gambit on the Korean Peninsula (Pak 2020), further complicating Seoul's policy options.

However, the rapid deepening of Russia-North Korea cooperation following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has significantly eroded the integrity of this sanctions regime. Facing its own economic isolation and diplomatic estrangement from the West, Russia has increasingly positioned itself as an economic lifeline for North Korea. Reports of Russian oil shipments to North Korea, including ship-to-ship transfers that evade international monitoring, have raised alarms about systematic violations of UNSC sanctions (Jankowicz 2024; *Reuters* 2024). These violations provide Pyongyang with critical energy supplies, sustaining its transportation, industry, and military operations.

Beyond energy, Russia has also facilitated North Korea's evasion of sanctions on coal exports. Investigations have suggested that North Korean coal continues to reach international markets via Russian ports, where it is relabeled as Russian-origin coal (Zakharova 2016). This practice undermines the international community's efforts to cut off one of North Korea's most significant revenue streams, directly enabling the regime to finance its weapons programs. Similarly, Russia's tolerance of North Korean laborers working under alternative visa categories further circumvents the ban on labor exports, sustaining Pyongyang's access to foreign currency earnings (Cha and Kim 2024).

The diplomatic consequences of Russia's actions are equally significant. As a permanent member of the UNSC, Russia's active role in undermining sanctions challenges the credibility of the Council itself. Moscow's refusal to endorse additional sanctions measures and its use of veto power to block new resolutions have paralyzed multilateral efforts to apply coordinated pressure on North Korea (Howell 2024). This diplomatic protection not only shields Pyongyang from further international isolation but also emboldens the regime to continue its nuclear and missile development without fear of unified global retaliation.

Regionally, these developments have heightened security concerns

among US allies, particularly South Korea and Japan. The erosion of the sanctions regime has allowed North Korea to continue advancing its military capabilities, including the testing of intercontinental ballistic missiles and tactical nuclear weapons. These actions have destabilized the regional security environment, forcing South Korea and Japan to strengthen their military readiness and deepen security cooperation with the United States (Snyder 2021).

China's response to Russia's expanding role has been notably ambivalent. While Beijing shares Moscow's interest in countering US influence, it is wary of losing strategic control over Pyongyang. Some analysts suggest that Russia's actions could trigger a new phase of competition between China and Russia for influence on the Korean Peninsula, complicating Beijing's long-term regional strategy (Rinna 2024). At the same time, China benefits from Russia absorbing some of the political costs of supporting North Korea, allowing Beijing to maintain a more balanced diplomatic posture.

In summary, the Russia-North Korea partnership has fundamentally weakened the effectiveness of international sanctions, providing Pyongyang with alternative economic and diplomatic lifelines. This erosion of sanctions enforcement has serious implications for regional stability, undermining efforts to curb North Korea's weapons programs and increasing the risk of military escalation on the Korean Peninsula. For South Korea and its allies, these developments necessitate a reevaluation of existing policy tools and a search for new strategies to address the evolving security and economic challenges posed by the Russia-North Korea axis.

#### *Growing Strategic Autonomy of North Korea and Its Economic Implications*

North Korea's historical pursuit of strategic autonomy has always been shaped by the need to balance its reliance on powerful allies while avoiding overdependence. For decades, Pyongyang navigated between Soviet and Chinese influence, eventually becoming heavily reliant on China after the collapse of the Soviet Union. This dependency deepened following the international sanctions imposed since 2016, which left China as North Korea's near-exclusive economic partner, accounting for over 90 percent of

its external trade (Ernst and Kim 2020).

However, the resurgence of Russia-North Korea relations since 2022 signals Pyongyang's effort to diversify its external ties and reclaim a degree of strategic autonomy. The 2024 Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Treaty formalized this renewed alignment, granting North Korea access to alternative economic channels, particularly in energy, labor, and infrastructure (Cha and Kim 2024). By expanding cooperation with Russia, Pyongyang reduces its sole dependence on Beijing, gaining leverage in its broader diplomatic and economic strategy.

One clear example is the increase in Russian energy supplies to North Korea despite UNSC sanctions, with satellite evidence indicating ship-to-ship transfers that bypass international monitoring (Jankowicz 2024; *Reuters* 2024). These supplies not only ensure a more stable energy flow for North Korea but also enable Pyongyang to resist potential economic coercion from China, which controls the country's primary oil pipeline.

Additionally, Russia's acceptance of North Korean laborers, even under alternative visa arrangements, provides Pyongyang with a steady source of foreign currency, helping sustain the regime's economic stability despite sanctions. Infrastructure projects like the Rajin-Khasan railway further demonstrate North Korea's ability to collaborate with partners other than China, symbolically positioning itself within broader Eurasian logistics networks (Toloraya 2014).

Nevertheless, the scope of this diversification remains limited. Russia's economic capacity is modest compared to China's, and logistical constraints—including North Korea's outdated infrastructure—hinder the expansion of large-scale cooperation. Russian-North Korean trade, while growing, is still a fraction of Pyongyang's trade volume with Beijing (KOTRA 2025). Moreover, Russia's own geopolitical and economic challenges restrict its ability to serve as a fully reliable partner.

Despite these limitations, the political value of this partnership is significant. By demonstrating that it has alternatives to China, North Korea strengthens its bargaining position not only with Beijing but also in negotiations with the United States and South Korea. This diversification allows Pyongyang to play external powers against each other, increasing its



diplomatic maneuverability.<sup>4</sup>

Regionally, this shift raises concerns among US allies. South Korea and Japan worry that North Korea, emboldened by backing from both Moscow and Beijing, may escalate its weapons testing and military provocations. The erosion of sanctions enforcement, supported by Russia's defiance of international restrictions, further complicates diplomatic efforts to manage North Korea's behavior (Snyder 2021).

In economic terms, while Russia provides short-term lifelines, North Korea's structural challenges remain unaddressed. Without significant reforms or broader international engagement, its economy is unlikely to achieve sustainable growth. However, by diversifying its partnerships, Pyongyang ensures regime stability and maintains its strategic flexibility in the face of ongoing external pressure.

In conclusion, North Korea's expanding ties with Russia represent a calculated strategy to enhance its strategic autonomy and reduce dependency on China. While the economic impact is constrained, the political and diplomatic implications are far-reaching, requiring careful attention from regional and global stakeholders concerned with Korean Peninsula security.

### *Policy Challenges for South Korea and Its Strategic Options*

The evolving Russia-North Korea partnership presents a set of profound policy challenges for South Korea. Historically, Seoul has relied on a combination of sanctions enforcement, inter-Korean engagement, and alliance coordination with the United States to manage North Korea's military threats and promote eventual denuclearization. However, the erosion of the international sanctions regime and the growing alignment between Pyongyang and Moscow have undermined these strategies, forcing South Korea to rethink its diplomatic and security posture.

One of the most immediate challenges is the weakening of international

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4. Analysts have noted that North Korea's engagement with Russia allows Pyongyang to balance Chinese influence and complicate US-led diplomatic strategies (Rinna 2024).

consensus on North Korea policy. Russia's open defiance of UNSC sanctions, including its oil shipments, labor arrangements, and port cooperation with North Korea, has effectively paralyzed multilateral enforcement mechanisms (Jankowicz 2024). As noted, Russia's refusal to support new sanctions resolutions and its use of veto power on the UNSC to block collective action severely limits the effectiveness of existing pressure tools. This deadlock complicates South Korea's ability to leverage the international community in addressing North Korea's continued weapons development.

South Korea also faces the risk of growing military instability on the Korean Peninsula. The Russia-North Korea partnership has raised concerns about potential military technology transfers, joint exercises, and arms sales that could enhance Pyongyang's missile and nuclear capabilities (Cha and Kim 2024). These developments threaten to upset the military balance in the region, increasing the likelihood of provocations or miscalculations that could escalate into open conflict. For Seoul, this necessitates a reassessment of its deterrence posture, including enhanced missile defense, precision strike capabilities, and intelligence-sharing with allies.

In response to these challenges, South Korea has accelerated its trilateral security cooperation with the United States and Japan. Recent breakthroughs in Seoul-Tokyo relations, including the resumption of military exercises and intelligence-sharing agreements, reflect a recognition that regional security requires greater alignment among US allies (Snyder 2021, 212). This trilateral framework not only strengthens collective deterrence but also signals unity in the face of the growing Russia-North Korea axis.

However, military cooperation alone is insufficient. South Korea must also strengthen its diplomatic efforts to build broader coalitions with middle powers such as the European Union, Australia, and ASEAN member states. By framing the Russia-North Korea partnership as a threat to the rules-based international order, Seoul can rally wider international support for sanctions enforcement, nonproliferation, and regional stability. Engaging with China remains equally important, despite the growing strategic competition between Beijing and Washington. South Korea must encourage China to take a more responsible role in managing North Korea's behavior, emphasizing shared interests in preventing escalation on the peninsula.

Domestically, South Korea faces the challenge of maintaining public support for a balanced policy that combines deterrence with diplomatic engagement. The deepening North Korea-Russia alignment may fuel public demand for stronger military measures, including expanded alliance commitments with the United States. However, an overly militarized response risks closing diplomatic channels and exacerbating regional tensions. Seoul must therefore articulate a clear and balanced strategy that reassures domestic audiences while keeping open the possibility of future dialogue with Pyongyang.

In addition to the security dimension, the Russia-North Korea partnership carries significant economic implications that require careful consideration in South Korea's policy response. Russia's provision of oil, coal, and agricultural products to North Korea helps stabilize Pyongyang's domestic markets and, in turn, diminishes the leverage that sanctions were intended to exert. This undercuts Seoul's long-term strategy of using economic pressure as a pathway to denuclearization. Moreover, the influx of Russian supplies has the potential to affect inter-Korean trade dynamics by reinforcing North Korea's market autonomy, thereby reducing incentives for Pyongyang to re-engage economically with the South (FAO 2024, 11; Rinna 2024). In this regard, the expansion of Russian inputs not only sustains North Korea's immediate survival but also strengthens its capacity for autonomous market management. Such a shift risks weakening the economic rationale for inter-Korean cooperation, as Pyongyang becomes less dependent on engagement with Seoul to secure vital resources. This dynamic complicates South Korea's ability to employ economic inducements as leverage for dialogue and denuclearization.

South Korea must also account for the indirect effects of Russia-North Korea exchanges on regional economic corridors. Infrastructure projects such as the Rajin-Khasan railway and the new Tumen River bridge not only improve North Korea's logistical connectivity with Russia but also reposition Pyongyang within broader Eurasian supply chains (Sokolin 2025; Beyond Parallel 2025). If left unchecked, these developments could marginalize Seoul's vision for inter-Korean economic integration and weaken South Korea's role in shaping Northeast Asia's trade architecture.

Consequently, any comprehensive policy framework must integrate an economic security perspective alongside military deterrence and diplomacy. This includes reinforcing sanctions enforcement mechanisms in cooperation with like-minded partners, while simultaneously developing contingency plans for regional economic integration that anticipates North Korea's evolving partnerships with Russia. By acknowledging the economic as well as strategic dimensions of the Russia-North Korea axis, South Korea can better safeguard its own economic security and maintain leverage in future inter-Korean engagement.

In economic terms, South Korea must prepare for the long-term implications of a North Korea that is increasingly connected to Russia and, by extension, other anti-Western coalitions. While direct inter-Korean economic cooperation remains unlikely under current conditions, Seoul should continue to promote international initiatives that support economic integration in Northeast Asia, including infrastructure and energy projects that could eventually involve both Koreas in a post-sanctions environment.

In conclusion, the Russia-North Korea partnership challenges South Korea's traditional security and diplomatic strategies. To address these evolving threats, Seoul must strengthen alliance coordination, expand diplomatic engagement with middle powers, and maintain a balanced approach that keeps future dialogue with Pyongyang on the table. Only through a comprehensive and adaptive strategy can South Korea navigate the complexities of the emerging regional security landscape.

## **Conclusion**

The evolving partnership between Russia and North Korea is one of the most consequential developments in Northeast Asia's contemporary strategic and economic environment. While international attention has primarily focused on the intensifying rivalry between the United States and China, Russia's renewed assertiveness on the Korean Peninsula adds a further layer of complexity that cannot be ignored. This study has examined the underlying drivers of the Russia-North Korea partnership, its implications for sanctions

enforcement, and the broader challenges it creates for South Korea and its allies. The evidence suggests that this is not merely an opportunistic alignment but a multifaceted and enduring relationship shaped by the two states' shared isolation from the Western-led order.

Historically, relations between Moscow and Pyongyang have passed through phases of close Cold War alliance, sharp post-Soviet decline, and gradual revival since the mid-2000s. The 2024 Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Treaty marks the most substantial upgrade since the end of the Soviet Union, institutionalizing cooperation across political, economic, and military domains. For Pyongyang, the treaty provides a valuable counterbalance to dependence on China and broadens diplomatic maneuverability. For Moscow, cultivating North Korea as a partner demonstrates its ability to expand influence despite sanctions and international isolation, while also positioning itself as a spoiler in US-led regional security frameworks. This re-engagement reflects a shared interest in undermining Western dominance, even if the material benefits remain asymmetrical.

The economic dimension of the partnership has particularly profound implications. Russia's provision of oil, coal, fertilizer, and agricultural goods has supplied North Korea with critical lifelines that weaken the intended impact of United Nations sanctions. These flows stabilize Pyongyang's markets and mitigate potential food crises, but they simultaneously erode the leverage sanctions were meant to provide. More significantly, they enhance North Korea's market autonomy, reducing incentives to re-engage economically with South Korea. In this sense, Russia's support not only sustains the regime's survival but also diminishes Seoul's bargaining power, raising fundamental questions about the effectiveness of economic inducements in promoting dialogue and denuclearization. The Rajin-Khasan railway and new Tumen River bridge, though modest in scale, further illustrate Pyongyang's intent to anchor itself within broader Eurasian supply networks.

Politically, Russia's position as a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council enables it to shield Pyongyang from additional punitive measures. Moscow's vetoes of sanctions resolutions and its refusal

to endorse new restrictions have paralyzed multilateral enforcement mechanisms. This erosion of collective action undermines the credibility of the Council, emboldens Pyongyang to continue weapons development, and contributes to a wider weakening of international governance. For South Korea, this trend represents not only a regional problem but also a systemic challenge to the international norms and institutions on which its security and economic prosperity have long depended.

The military dimension adds further risks. Reports of arms transfers, technology sharing, and potential joint defense activities suggest the possibility of an accelerated North Korean weapons program. Importantly, the relationship is not one-sided. Pyongyang has reportedly provided Moscow with artillery, rockets, and other munitions for use in Ukraine, and there are indications of possible personnel support. Recognizing this reciprocal dimension highlights that the partnership is transactional rather than unilateral, with each side offering tangible benefits. This mutual exchange strengthens the durability of the axis and extends its impact beyond Northeast Asia into the European theater, linking the security of the Korean Peninsula with the trajectory of the war in Ukraine.

For South Korea, these shifts present profound policy dilemmas. Traditional reliance on sanctions enforcement is increasingly ineffective as Russia provides alternative lifelines. Seoul must reinforce trilateral cooperation with the United States and Japan, expand intelligence-sharing, and invest in advanced missile defense. Yet deterrence alone cannot suffice. South Korea should broaden diplomatic outreach to middle powers and engage pragmatically with China, while also integrating economic security into its national strategy. The growing Russia-North Korea alignment demonstrates that economic resilience can be weaponized to blunt pressure, meaning Seoul must anticipate long-term changes in inter-Korean trade dynamics and regional integration projects. Failure to respond risks leaving South Korea sidelined in shaping the evolving architecture of Northeast Asian economic and security relations.

Ultimately, South Korea's ability to manage these challenges will depend on balancing firmness with flexibility, deterrence with diplomacy, and national interests with multilateral responsibility. Only through such

an adaptive approach can Seoul mitigate risks while maintaining its role as a middle power in a rapidly shifting strategic order. Recognizing the transactional nature of the Russia-North Korea partnership underscores the urgency of recalibrating strategy, as both Moscow and Pyongyang are actively reshaping the regional balance in ways that directly affect the Korean Peninsula. A comprehensive response that integrates security, diplomacy, and economic policy will be essential not only to address immediate threats but also to safeguard long-term stability in Northeast Asia.

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