

Sanction Comradeship: The Russia-North Korea Alliance Against Western Embargoes

Yaptırım Yoldaşlığı: Batı Ambargolarına Karşı Rusya-Kuzey Kore İttifakı

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Abstract

The division of the Korean Peninsula after World War II and its emergence as a focal point of the Cold War turned this country into a geopolitically significant actor, leading to a close relationship with the Soviet Union. This study focuses on the historical and geopolitical background of the long-standing relationship between Russia and North Korea, stemming from their ideological solidarity during the Cold War years. In this article, this resilient alliance between the two powers is termed as “sanction comradeship,” highlighting their common stance of resistance against the West and their enduring opposition to international sanctions. In examining the position of these two countries within international system, the study focuses primarily on the period from 2010 onwards, particularly until 2023. In this context, the study explores how the rapprochement between North Korea and Russia, under the influence of international developments, has evolved as a response to sanctions imposed to limit their impact on global affairs through the lens of “sanction comradeship.” This study will point out the continuity and changes in the history of their relations, discussing how both ‘countries’ behaviors in the face of sanctions shape their current foreign policies.

Keywords: Russia, North Korea, Sanction, Comradeship

Öz

İkinci Dünya Savaşı sonrası Kore Yarımadası'nın bölünmesi ve Soğuk Savaş'ın bir çatışma noktası haline gelmesi, Kuzey Kore'yi jeopolitik açıdan önemli bir oyuncu haline getirmiştir. Soğuk Savaş yıllarındaki ideolojik dayanışmadan doğan Sovyet ve Kuzey Kore arasındaki ilişkilerin tarihsel ve jeopolitik arka planına özellikle 2022 Rusya-Ukrayana Savaşı ile daha da önem kazanmıştır. Bu iki güç arasındaki dayanıklı iş birliği “yaptırım yoldaşlığı” olarak Batı'ya karşı ortak bir direniş pozisyonlarını ve uluslararası yaptırımlara karşı sürdürülen karşıtlıklarını vurgulamaktadır. Örnek olay incelemesi olarak bu iki ülkenin sistemdeki durumu incelenirken uluslararası alandaki gelişmeler ışığında, Kuzey Kore ve Rusya arasındaki yakınlaşmanın, dünya meselelerindeki etkilerini sınırlamak amacıyla uygulanan yaptırımlara bir yanıt olarak nasıl geliştiği, “yaptırım yoldaşlığı” çerçevesinde ele alınmaktadır. Çalışma, iki ülkenin ortak çabalarını ve ilişkilerindeki tarihsel süreklilikleri ve değişimleri işaret ederek, her iki ülkenin yaptırımlar karşısındaki davranışlarının mevcut dış politikalarını nasıl etkilediğini tartışacaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Rusya, Kuzey Kore, Yaptırımlar, Yoldaşlık

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Introduction

The division of the Korean Peninsula along the 38th parallel between capitalist South Korea and Communist Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK, North Korea)¹ irrevocably and profoundly changed what at one time had been a unified political entity. This seismic shift in the politics of the peninsula occurred shortly after the Allied forces freed the region from 36 years of Japanese rule at the end of World War II. Separate governments were established and military occupations occurred in the south by the United States and in the north by the Soviet Union. In the American zone, the 24th Corps U.S. Army under General John R. Hodge held command, and in the Soviet zone, under the command of the 25th Army was the 1st Front of the Soviet Far Eastern Front Forces. However, this military government that seemed so bewildering and mortifying to the Koreans brought a high level of discontent and defiance, particularly in the South. The local sentiment thus became a fundamental consequence of the unfulfilled expectations by the Koreans. This has been an important influence in the shaping of post-war history in this region. Both Koreas, due to different ideological differences, set up separate governments and engaged this region as a crucial battle zone in the Cold War. The Korean peninsula, at the interface of two geopolitical spheres, became an epicentre of ideological struggle between the capitalist West and communist East (Chang-II, 2010). This era of tension culminated in the Korean War, which lasted from 1950 to 1953. North Korea is north of the demarcation line established by the Korean Armistice Agreement in July 1953. Its total area measures 123,138 km², accounting for approximately 55% of the entire Korean Peninsula, which spans 223,516 km², showcasing the vastness and diversity of this region (Nationalatlas, nd.).

The influence of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics in Korea would continue throughout the Cold War on ideological grounds. Indeed, this situation is still important today. Although the Cold War is over and the division between North and South has divided Korea today, the rigid ideological situation that existed in the past is still felt. Throughout the Cold War and the new millennium, the Korean Peninsula and the Russian Federation have played a crucial role in shaping global geopolitics. On the one hand, the Korean Peninsula has emerged as a frontline in the ideological struggle between the capitalist West and the communist East. As one of the central actors in this global struggle, Russia has maintained particular influence on both regional and international levels. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Russia's foreign policy underwent a significant shift. It sought to reinforce its influence in traditional areas like Central Asia and Europe and aimed to broaden its strategic interests in the Asia-Pacific region. In the contemporary shifting world, North Korea's geopolitical location on the borders of China and Russia has made the country incrementally a focal point for Russia, especially concerning the planned effort to counter Western influence in order to strengthen its own position as a global power.

The Russian Federation's foreign policy has become increasingly important, especially in the post-2000 period. The most fundamental reason for this can undoubtedly be seen in Russia's regaining its power as one of the leading actors of the bipolar system (a system

¹ Hereafter, North Korea.

characterized by the existence of two major powers or blocs, typically the United States and Russia, just like during the Cold War. In this context, while the relations with Central Asia, the Middle East and Europe in Russia's foreign policy have been revised and become power-oriented, the Asia Pacific region has also become an equally important area. In this region, relations with North Korea create the most attention-grabbing field. But what makes the relations between North Korea and Russia so remarkable? While this study will discuss the rapprochement between Russia and North Korea in the international arena, our primary goal here is to see the common ground formed by the relations between the two countries. It is seen that the West is particularly decisive in the relations between the two countries. In this context, the West's other discourses have become the most fundamental unifying factor for both Russia and North Korea. As a result, sanctions have become the most fundamental common motivation in their bilateral relations. While the West has imposed sanctions aimed at limiting North Korea's and Russia's power in their foreign policy, both actors have created a common alliance area to evade these sanctions. Particularly, after 2010, this process opened a new era in North Korea's relations with Russia and China, with the later being a key actor in the region. The second pivotal moment is particularly evident in the case of Russia. This is marked by Russia's initiation of its so-called "special military operation" in Ukraine in February 2022, a military action intended to achieve a defined objective. In the regional war that has been ongoing since 2022, the West has made harsh sanction decisions against Russia. Moscow has been defending these sanctions by seeking and consolidating new alliances. In this context, North Korean relations become essential.

This study will comprehensively focus on the impact of sanctions in the context of recent developments in the relations between Russia and North Korea. However, when discussing North Korea, the underlying structure shaped by historical and ideological contexts is often overlooked. To address this, the study will briefly examine the historical influence that began during the Cold War, driven by the ideological framework that shaped relations between Russia and North Korea. The goal is to understand how past and future dynamics shape both countries' positions and policies against the West in the current context. The term "Sanctions Comradeship" is used here to emphasize the historical ties between the two countries and to highlight a consistent Western approach that has remained unchanged over time. This study will therefore examine Western sanctions, the key issue underpinning the sanctions camaraderie between Russia and North Korea within the current international system. From the Cold War to the present, relations between Russia and North Korea have consistently reflected their stance against the West. Within this framework, the study effectively analyzes the significant impacts of the Russia-Ukraine War since 2022. The primary focus here is twofold: the ongoing international sanctions against North Korea, especially in relation to its nuclear ambitions, and the significant sanctions and geopolitical rupture affecting Russia in its relations with the West as a result of the Russia-Ukraine War.

Navigating Political Dynamics in Russia-North Korea Relations

The relations between Russia and North Korea, which have historical and ideological ties, stand out as one of the most notable examples of China.² When the DPRK was established on September 9, 1948, it adopted the Soviet model of socialism. It followed Soviet-style foreign policy during the Cold War starting in 1950s. However, North Korea's divergence from the Soviet Union's model led to the development of a unique and independent policy known as Kimilsungism with Korean characteristics in the post-Korean War in 1950s and 1960s. This policy, rooted in Kim's Juche ideology, emphasized self-reliance and bore similarities to the Maoist model of development. The leadership cult has relegated the KKP to an insignificant role in policymaking, relegating the Party to a secondary position. The Suryong system is a type of hereditary leadership; that is why North Korea has had only three leaders since the country was formed. Kim Il-sung, its founder and eternal leader, designed a peculiar socialist state system and installed 'Juche' as its official ideology. Hence, Juche is curical in its highly particular political culture (Kılıçtaroğlu & Demir, 2023, p. 483).

With great determination, the North Korean leadership pursued a hard-line policy of three great revolutions—the ideological revolution, the cultural revolution, and the technological revolution—to address the economic challenges arising from the Sino-Soviet disputes over Communist ideology (Kim, 2002). On the other hand, alliances with China and the Soviet Union were especially crucial in the security and economic spheres for North Korea. However, the de-Stalinization process under Nikita Khrushchev after the death of Joseph Stalin in 1953, the Sino-Soviet split in the 1960s, and the liberalization efforts in China and the Soviet Union during the 1980s prompted debates within North Korea's leadership about governance and its relations with those Powers (Kılıçtaroğlu & Demir, 2023, pp. 486-488).

Indeed, the bond between the North Korea and the Soviet Union was marked by the ideological closeness between Joseph Stalin and Kim Il Sung. In the relations between the USSR and North Korea, Soviet economic and military support was significant. During Nikita Khrushchev's period, the two countries signed the Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Assistance.³ On the other hand, economic relationship between Soviet and the DPRK has greatly diverged from the era of the 1970s and 1980s when the Soviet Union handled up to 50% of North Korea's foreign trade. Currently, trade statistics show that Russia accounts for only 1.2% of North Korea's foreign trade, with China dominating the sector with 92.5%, pushing Russia to the second position in terms of trade partnership (Lukin & Zakharova, 2018).

The problems that Russia experienced in domestic politics during the 1990s, especially economic problems and sociological fractures (suicide, alcoholism, etc.), limited the

² For a correct understanding of the importance of the imperial-era relationship between Russia and Korea, one has to put both countries in the 19th century context as an interplay against colonial ambitions in the Western powers and Japan. Japanese colonialism took its first target in the Korean Peninsula, but the process was not quite easy for Japan. Both China and Russia tried to support Korea against the expansionist policies of Japan (see Çelik, 2020, p.133).

³ For more information: Treaty of friendship, co-operation and mutual assistance. Signed at Moscow, on 6 July 1961 <https://treaties.un.org/doc/Publication/UNTS/Volume%20420/volume-420-I-6045-English.pdf>

robust Russian approach and presence in foreign policy. In this respect, Russia was a limited actor in Asia Pacific, as it was in many regions during the 1990s. After the Cold War, as the Russian Federation turned inward to focus on domestic politics, North Korea lost its most important economic and military supporter. This support, which included economic aid and military equipment, was crucial for North Korea's survival and development. Also, an exception to this might be North Korean labour, which is evident in Russia's Far East. North Korea's shortage of hard currency limits its appeal as an export market. Unlike the Soviet era, Russia is not willing to sell goods at friendly prices or provide long-term preferential credit to North Korea. Their economic relations are now more pragmatic and market-based, contrasting with the unilateral economic advantages Russia offers to former Soviet allies like Belarus.

On the one hand, the post-1990 era reflects the emergence of a newly shaped global international system, with the collapse of the Soviet Union having a great impact on North Korea. In this context, the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union marked a turning point for North Korea, which has since become more aggressive in both domestic and foreign policy. Officially announced in 1997, the so-called Songun (Military First) policy was the continuation of the Juche ideology but gave the military the leading role in state governance. In this respect, the military was supposed to act not only as a defense force but also as the "brain" that plans the state and solves both domestic and international problems. The KKIP which previously held authority second only to the leader, ceded this role to the military, creating a brief period of dual power (Kılıçtaroğlu & Demir, 2023, p. 490).

On the other hand, in this period Yeltsin's policy focused on developing relations with South Korea for several reasons, including the de-ideologization of foreign policy and limited resources to support North Korea. Russia's orientation towards the USA and EU, and the inability to work out a new policy towards former allies, were weaknesses. The deterioration of relations with North Korea was due to economic constraints, including Russia's own deep economic crisis and the public opposition to continuing economic assistance to former Soviet allies. Disagreements over market mechanisms, and North Korea's sympathy towards anti-democratic opposition also played a role in this deterioration. Market reforms in Russia led to limited cooperation with North Korea by local governments in the Russian Far East regions. Seung-Ho Joo's (2000) analysis underscores the historical significance of the 1961 alliance treaty between the DPRK and the USSR, a pivotal document that shaped Russia's relations with both Koreas. The fate of this treaty, particularly Seoul's concerns regarding Article 1 which mandated automatic military involvement in the event of war, was a key factor in the evolution of these relations. Despite Moscow's decision not to formally renounce the treaty in 1992, it was extended for another five years as stipulated. The Russian Foreign Ministry considered amending the treaty, a move that would require approval from a parliament dominated by opposition parties, leading to apprehensions about the treaty's future.

During the same period, Russia created new alternative areas when addressing its foreign policy. In addition to the historical relations with North Korea, South Korea was also seen as an essential factor in the post-1990 period in terms of creating a new area of cooperation. South Korea wanted to expand its trade relations with the Soviet Union and after 1992 with the Russian Federation in line with its strong economy and search for new

markets. After the formalization of diplomatic relations between the two countries, at the end of 1990, South Korean President Roh Tae-woo met with Mikhail Gorbachev in Moscow and agreed to provide a three-year loan of \$3 billion to the later. This loan agreement was a significant step in their economic relations. While \$2 billion of this loan was allocated for the purchase of South Korean products by the Soviets at attractive prices, the remaining \$1 billion was allocated for the development of Soviet industry. The Soviets stated that they would partially pay this loan with raw materials such as coal and natural gas. While these resources were abundantly available to the Soviets, they were capable of meeting South Korea's import needs. As of 1993, the two countries engaged in negotiations about a pipeline project that would stretch from North Korea to South Korea, covering the natural gas fields in Yakutia. This project, with an estimated cost of \$20-30 billion, was not just a financial investment. It held the potential to foster a strategic partnership that would not only strengthen economic ties but also influence political relations. Furthermore, it would serve as a means to enhance Russia's presence on the Korean Peninsula, promising a future of mutual benefit and growth (Zacek, n.d.).

However, these relations do not present a picture as deep as the historical relations with North Korea. Russia aims to establish a stable relationship with North Korea for national security and economic reasons based on cooperation. Concerned about a potential collapse of North Korea impacting its Far East security, Russia seeks to mediate between the Koreas and encourage dialogue for peaceful unification. Having previously neglected its ties with North Korea, Russia now wants to regain Northeast Asian influence. Economically, Russia is dissatisfied with South Korea's limited investments and needs to normalize relations with Pyongyang to recover 3.6 billion rubles in debt. Additionally, North Korean cooperation is not only essential for the success of a natural gas pipeline project to South Korea, but also holds the potential for significant economic growth. Resuming economic ties would benefit the Russian economy, particularly in the Far East (Seung-Ho Joo, 2000)

The relationship between the Russia and North Korea remained limited until the 2000s. However, with the start of Vladimir Putin's tenure, Russia's relations with North Korea began to revive. During the era of Kim Jong Un, who succeeded his father, Kim Jong Il, after his death, continuity in bilateral relations was maintained. The latest development in these relations is Pyongyang's statements supporting Russia in the face of Western sanctions during the ongoing Russia-Ukraine War. This demonstrates that the historically rooted relationship between the two countries has remained unchanged.

Creating Sanctions Comradeship Between Russia and North Korea

Economic sanctions can be applied to restrict an actor's ability to import or export specific goods or to halt financial aid to that actor, as in the case of U.S. sanctions on Iran (Katzman, 2021). Relatedly, arms embargoes are implemented with the intention of reducing violence between actors, or to deter an opponent in a particular defense or offensive area. However, they can also serve as a punitive measure to influence an actor's behavior, as in the arms embargo imposed on Türkiye during the Cyprus Operation (Goodie, 2020). Additionally, diplomatic sanctions may involve the limitation or cessation of diplomatic relations with an actor. The most significant example in this

context is the withdrawal of ambassadors or the suspension of diplomatic relations between states (Grebe, 2010).

At this point, there needs to be a sanctions partnership between Russia and North Korea. With this understanding, there are certain commonalities that push these two countries into a “sanctions comradeship”. The first is being perceived as the “other” in the system. Secondly, both countries exhibit a tendency to act independently in the international community, maintaining a critical stance both ideologically and in their approach. Thirdly, the West seeks to contain these countries, viewing them as unpredictable actors within the international system. Fourthly, both actors are subject to strong and extensive international sanctions, limiting their interactions and capabilities on the global stage. Fifthly, both countries possess the capacity to mitigate the impact of sanctions through mutual interests. In other words, each country is inclined to counteract sanctions by pursuing strategic steps and cooperation with the other.

Sanctions on North Korea

Particularly, after 2010, the relationship between Russia and North Korea has deepened due to the impact of sanctions. In other words, the marginalization of North Korea in the West’s policy has pushed it to further increase its cooperation with Russia and China. The period after 2010 has witnessed a resurgence of global conflicts and wars, particularly in the Middle East and the former Soviet territories. These conflicts have heightened tensions among Russia, China, and the United States, impacting North Korea’s geopolitical position. The transfer of weapons from North Korea contravenes a minimum of 10 United Nations Security Council (UNSC) sanction resolutions, which Russia endorsed upon their adoption in the 2000s and 2010s after North Korea’s nuclear and missile tests. These UNSC sanctions prohibit the procurement or sale of arms to North Korea, among other restrictions. Additionally, they proscribe any assistance to North Korea’s ballistic missile programs, encompassing space or satellite launch activities (Nikitin et al., 2024).

Between 2006 and 2017, Russia and China supported 10 UNSC sanctions resolutions targeting North Korea’s illicit nuclear weapons and missile programs (table I). These measures impose trade and engagement restrictions, prohibit weapons transfers, and aim to compel North Korea to denuclearize (Bowen et al., 2024). Actually, in Russia’s foreign policy, the official goal of supporting the international regime against the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) is consistently emphasized. However, Moscow’s response to another country’s acquisition or testing of nuclear weapons is a strategic process, varying depending on its relations with that country. This response usually does not involve serious sanctions (Lukin, 2018). However, before 2017, Russia supported sanctions on North Korea’s nuclear and missile programs at the UN Security Council. Russia-North Korea bilateral economic ties are relatively marginal, with China accounting for over 90% of North Korea’s trade. Also, UNSC has decided to impose new sanctions on North Korea following a series of events. These include North Korea’s alleged hydrogen bomb tests, the adoption of two UNSC resolutions, 1695 on July 15, 2006, and 1718 on October 14, 2006, and North Korea’s alleged ballistic missile tests in 2006 (Table I). Resolution 1718 (Table I) was issued under Chapter 7 of the UN Charter, which covers the use of force (AA, 2016).

Since March 2016, when the first stringent UN sanctions were imposed, North Korea has approached its dealings with foreign partners, including Russia, with greater seriousness and professionalism. The Federal Customs Service of Russia reported that the bilateral turnover 2016 amounted to \$76.8 million (Jochheim, 2023). It is also essential to consider the relationship between Seoul and Moscow, which has developed mainly through active economic cooperation since South Korea and the Soviet Union established diplomatic relations in 1990. In 2021, Russia emerged as the tenth-largest export partner of South Korea, with South Korean goods exported to Russia totalling \$9.97 billion, as reported by the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development. Furthermore, Russia is a significant energy supplier for South Korea, contributing to less than 10% of its total energy imports. On the flip side, Russia's goods exports to South Korea surpassed \$17 billion in 2021. This issue is making South Korea its fifth-largest export destination (Chiacu & Brunnstrom, 2024). The economic ties between the two countries are further strengthened by Korea's investment in Russia, which accumulated to USD 4.16 billion by 2022 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs ROK, n.d.). Both countries also view each other through an economic and geostrategic lens, with Russia seeing South Korea as a primary gateway to the Pacific Ocean, and South Korea recognizing Russia as a key partner in regional connectivity projects, such as logistics and energy networks. This perspective underscores the potential of their relationship for transnational cooperation in the Eurasian continent (Chiacu and Brunnstrom, 2024).

Resolution No	Sanctions	Events
1718	Arms embargo, luxury goods import ban	Nuclear and ballistic tests
1874	Ban on all arms transfers	Nuclear test
2087	Tightening of previous sanctions	Satellite launch
2094	Increased financial restrictions	Nuclear test
2270	Restrictions on mineral exports, banking bans	Nuclear test
2321	Restrictions on maritime and air transportation	Nuclear test
2371	Ban on the export of coal, iron, and other resources	Ballistic missile tests
2375	Reduces of refined petroleum products	Nuclear test
2397	Quota on petroleum imports*,* maritime embargo	Nuclear and ballistic missile activities

Table 1: Sanctions on North Korea (Davenport, 2022; Habib, 2016; Howell, 2016; TRThaber, 2017; Macdonald, 2017)

On the contrary, in 2018, Kim Jong Un expressed interest in meeting U.S. President Donald Trump during a meeting with South Korean officials in Pyongyang. Trump accepted, and they met in Singapore three months later, signing a joint statement to improve bilateral relations and denuclearization efforts. After the summit, joint military exercises between the U.S. and South Korea were put on hold. This led to increased dialogue between the two Koreas, and North Korea began dismantling some of its facilities. Additionally, the remaining U.S. service members from the Korean War were returned. However, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) later expressed

* The annual import limit for refined petroleum products to North Korea is set at 500,000 barrels.

concerns regarding North Korea's nuclear program. The subsequent Trump-Kim meeting in Hanoi in 2019 made little progress, with the U.S. maintaining sanctions while North Korea continued missile tests. Tensions grew, with North Korea accusing the Trump administration of seeking diplomatic gains for domestic politics. Under the Biden administration, North Korea has continued missile testing and resisted negotiations (Davenport, 2022).

Finally, it is necessary to consider the background of Russia's approach, especially regarding nuclear and sanctions. Russia played a pivotal role in the preparation of the U.N. Security Council resolutions adopted after North Korea launched missiles and conducted nuclear tests in 2006. It also supported the tightening of these sanctions in 2009 and 2013. However, Russia, like China, has generally tried to soften these sanctions when negotiating the terms of the sanctions. There are two main reasons: First, Russia is concerned that the sanctions will lead to an uncontrolled collapse of the North Korean regime, which will create serious problems such as nuclear weapons falling into the hands of uncontrolled groups or a flow of refugees. Second, the feelings in Russia dating back to the Cold War period, which sees North Korea as a partner against the efforts of the U.S. and its allies to establish dominance in Asia, are still firm; therefore, it is thought that the destruction of North Korea would be harmful (Lukin, 2018, pp. 274-275). The third view suggests that Russia aimed to strengthen its position as an independent and vital actor that could contribute to stability on the Korean Peninsula. The goal was to prevent war and avoid direct involvement in the Sino-American rivalry while also steering clear of efforts to contain North Korea following the 2013 Sino-American summit. The Korean Peninsula became important in Putin's strategy toward Asia, as Moscow feared that lacking influence in the region would lead to exclusion from both China and the U.S. While Russia and China often voice their common interests against Washington on a global scale, their rivalry and disagreements appear to be more pronounced on a regional level (Blank, 2019, p. 286).

Sanctions on Russia

Since 2022, the ongoing conflict in Ukraine and the continued imposition of sanctions have contributed to a complex international landscape, especially between the West and Russia. Russia has been exploring new avenues and engaging with regional and international organizations to safeguard its interests. Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, European Council President Charles Michel held an extraordinary meeting with EU member states, announcing comprehensive sanctions against Russia (European Commission, 2022). Coordinated by the European External Action Service, the European Commission, and member countries, these sanctions aimed to weaken Russia's economic base, restrict its access to critical technologies, and limit its warfare capacity. Measures included freezing the assets of Russia's Central Bank, removing major Russian banks from the SWIFT system, and imposing a price cap on Russian oil imports (Table II). Additionally, the controversial Nord Stream 2 pipeline project was suspended, severing Russia's strategic energy links with Europe, particularly Germany (Wettengel, 2023). These sanctions represent significant steps toward economically and politically isolating Russia on the international stage.

Against this backdrop, the relationship between Russia and North Korea has gained significance. While Western influence is evident, North Korea is using this bilateral engagement to alleviate its international isolation. The reciprocal sanctions imposed on both countries have led to a marginalized partnership, with the deepening of their relationship seen as a key strategy to bypass existing sanctions. As a result, the development of ties between these two countries has impacted the positive momentum in Russia-South Korea relations since 1990. In this sense, Western sanctions on Russia have created divisions reminiscent of the Cold War era.

Sanction Package	Sanction	Description
First Sanctions Package	Freezing of Russian Central Bank Assets Removal of Major Russian Banks from SWIFT	The European Union, USA, UK, and Canada froze the assets of the Russian Central Bank in their respective countries. Major Russian banks have been removed from the international SWIFT payment system.
Second Sanctions Package	Prohibition of Russian Companies from Borrowing	Russian companies are prohibited from borrowing in international markets.
Third Sanctions Package	Price Cap on Seaborne Transport of Russian Oil	A price cap has been imposed on the transport of Russian oil to third countries via sea.
Fourth Sanctions Package	Ban on Export of Oil Refinery Goods and Technology to Russia	Exports of goods and technologies related to the oil refinery sector to Russia are prohibited

Table 2: Sanctions on Russian Federation (Bloomberg, 2023; BBC, 2022; NTV, 2022)

Although North Korea appears to be a closed country, its influence on the international system cannot be neglected. The most basic criterion here is the Russia-Ukraine War that started in 2022, and the process that followed. Before that, one issue that needs to be focused on in the region is North Korea's relations with regional and European countries. Evidently, after China the Netherlands and Poland are the largest trade partners of North Korea. Last year, Poland imported a significant volume of goods, including iron, steel, plastic products, and pharmaceuticals, valued at nearly \$10 million. Meanwhile, approximately half of the Netherlands' imports, totalling around \$8 million, consisted of nickel and nickel products, with substantial amounts of polyethylene and aeroplane parts also being imported.

The table shows that for North Korea, the 2023 data represents an increase. But it needs to be highlighted that this improvement only partially reflects the economic situation of the country. This is due to the imposed sanctions and its restrictive anti-COVID policy. Most of its sparsely populated border trade was virtually choked off by self-imposed lockdowns to keep out COVID-19—a move that devastated trade and economic activities in that country (Reuters, 2023).

On the Russian side, as the West continues to extend support to Ukraine in its struggle against Russian aggression, it concurrently enforces comprehensive global sanctions on Russia. This unified approach underscores the extensive ramifications of the conflict on an international scale. Following 2022, the effect of sanctions on arbitration has become an increasingly important topic. Shortly after the war, the European Union, the United

States, the United Kingdom, Japan, and other nations imposed extensive sanctions to bring Russia to the peace table and uphold Ukraine's territorial integrity, swiftly making Russia the most sanctioned country in the World (Kryvoi, 2022).

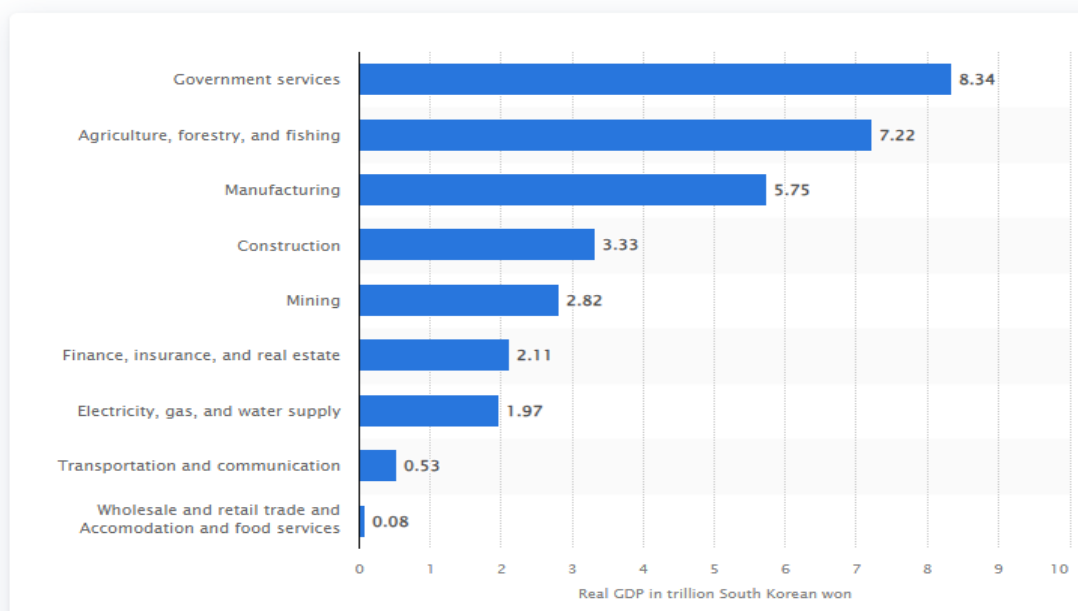


Chart I : North Korea's real gross domestic product (GDP) in 2023, by industry (Statista, available at: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/747759/north-korea-real-gdp-by-industry/>)

In 2023, while the Russian-Ukrainian war was ongoing, Kim Jong Un visited Russia. The importance of this visit is hidden in the historical past of the train. As mentioned before, history has an important place in Russian-North Korean relations. In fact, this visit is based on the Soviet Union leader Josef Stalin giving Kim Il-sung a specially equipped wagon to use on his travels (Wonju, 2023). Thus, since 1948, train journeys have become a tradition for Kim Il-sung and his son Kim Jong-il. It is important to note that when President Putin visited Pyongyang in 2000, Russia was a member of the G8, and North Korea had not yet conducted its initial nuclear test. Since then, the geopolitical landscape has undergone significant transformations, characterized by a more assertive stance from Putin and the younger Kim Jong-un focused on advancing nuclear capabilities. The ongoing invasion of Ukraine by Russia, alongside North Korea's continued missile tests, has heightened the isolation of both countries. However, these developments have also fortified their alliance in opposition to what they consider the "hostile" actions of the United States and its allies. They also finalized economic and security agreements, demonstrating their unity in confronting the West. The U.S. Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin confirmed that North Korea has shipped arms and munitions to Russia, and the deployment of troops is a next step in their support (U.S. Department of Defense, 2024). Hence, during this meeting, the messages exchanged between Kim Jong-un and Vladimir Putin at the Vostochny Cosmodrome in Russia's Far East were significant. Concluding his first trip abroad in four years, Kim highlighted the deep-rooted friendship between the two nations and reiterated his ideological stance in contrast to the West, echoing sentiments from the Soviet era. While Russia upholds its position on sanctions against North Korea at the U.N., the potential benefits of a significant arms deal should not be

overlooked. Russia claims it could impede bilateral relations, while the U.S. worries about its impact on the Ukraine conflict. The recent meeting at the Vostochny Space Center seems primarily focused on North Korea's support for satellite production. Putin noted that, due to isolation from the G-20 and other forums, Russia seeks to strengthen ties with North Korea. Kim's rocket and space research involvement may mark the beginning of closer relations (Özel Özcan, 2023). However, the implications for global security, particularly concerning the Russia-Ukraine situation, are significant.

Conversely, South Korea remains the nation's most apprehensive about the armament strategies employed by its northern counterpart. The country is closely monitoring the strengthening ties between Russia and North Korea and the outcomes of their agreements. Official reports indicate that, as of February 2024, North Korea has sent approximately 6,700 containers of ammunition to Russia, believed to include over three million 152-mm artillery shells (Al Jazeera, 2024b). This development is not surprising, given the ongoing Russia-Ukraine War and the sanctions imposed on Russia. The UN Security Council has set North Korea's refined oil imports at 500,000 barrels per year, a clear energy limitation under the international sanctions imposed on North Korea. The ongoing oil trade between the two countries, in defiance of UN Resolution 2397, is a blatant violation of the sanctions and a matter of urgent concern (Chiacu and David Brunnstrom, 2024). RUSI's analysis in March revealed that North Korean tankers were loading oil from a Russian port in the country's Far East, allegedly in exchange for ammunition and missiles, further highlighting the need for stricter enforcement of the sanctions (Byrne, et al., 2024).



Figure I: North Korean oil tankers in Chongjin (Planet Labs, and RUSI Project Sandstone, Byrne, et al., 2024).

As of May 2024, the issue has resurfaced with the announcement of new companies added to US sanctions. The companies Rafort Limited Liability Company, Trans Kapital

Limited Liability Company and Tekhnologiya have been included in the US's new sanctions decision scope. This was to prevent the exchange of arms between North Korea and Russia, a potential threat to international security.⁴ From the U.S. perspective, Russia's provision of weapons and technology to North Korea is seen as a destabilizing initiative. However, it also provides a realpolitik area of interest that brings the two countries closer. This 'realpolitik area of interest' refers to the strategic benefits and influence that Russia gains from its relationship with North Korea. Although the extent of military-focused relations between the parties does not directly lead to confrontation with the West to the point of an international conflict, it is evident that it creates a deterrent effect against the West on a win-win basis for both countries. According to state media, North Korean leader Kim Jong Un received a car from Russian President Vladimir Putin as a gesture of their "special personal relations." The car, whose make and model were not disclosed, was delivered to Kim's aides for his "personal use." This gift may violate UN sanctions that prohibit supplying vehicles to North Korea (Al Jazeera, 2024a)

In a nutshell, relations between Russia and North Korea have experienced notable momentum, especially in recent times. This development highlights the fact that the relationship between Russia and North Korea, deeply rooted in historical and geopolitical contexts, has been reshaped by their shared interests. These shared interests, which go beyond military and economic cooperation, have led to a significant enhancement of their alliance. Both Moscow and Pyongyang deny any arms transfers and maintain a united front against accusations from the West. Moreover, the ties between these countries extend beyond military and economic cooperation; they are also reinforcing a common stance against Western pressures, including economic sanctions and military presence in the region. This rapprochement between Russia and North Korea emerges as a new and intricate alliance within the current global balance of power.

Conclusion

The historical bond between Russia and North Korea is also notable for its ideological dimension. Both actors have positioned themselves in opposition to the West within the international system, often regarded as the "other." In this sense, relations between the two countries have changed since the Cold War era, but, paradoxically, have also remained unchanged. This continuity can be attributed to the evolving nature of the global system and the changing context, which still places both actors in a marginalized position. Following the Cold War, Russia, as the successor state of the USSR, encountered issues with the West, particularly under a great power paradigm, which has set certain limits on its geopolitical actions. This situation is similarly applicable to Kim Jong-un. Both leaders are challenging the West within the current system, asserting a different approach to power. As a result, the international sanctions imposed on these actors limit their actions, but their interdependent relationship has effectively rendered these restrictions meaningless.

Thus, while both actors increase their mutual dependence, they simultaneously challenge the system's isolating policies against them. This defiance also enhances the value of reducing the impact of sanctions. In this regard, the existing differences within the system,

⁴ More information: <https://www.state.gov/new-measures-to-degrade-russias-wartime-economy/>

much like during the Cold War, have fostered a form of camaraderie between these two countries. Both nations, based on common interests, are challenging the Western-led courses of action in the international stage. In particular, Russia has provided North Korea with a vital breathing space by helping to mitigate or circumvent United Nations sanctions, while also supplying significant aid to counter the country's food shortages. Conversely, North Korea has become a lifeline for Russia. Particularly, amid the ongoing war in Ukraine, North Korea has provided artillery shells and similar supplies that Russia has been unable to access due to sanctions. In this respect, North Korea has become a critical "factory" for Russia, offering essential support during the conflict. In conclusion, the "sanctions comradeship" between Russia and North Korea, much like during the Cold War era, is becoming increasingly strengthened and significant amid what can be seen as a new Cold War period.

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