

Gergely Salát: New dynamics in the Beijing–Moscow–Pyongyang Triangle¹

Executive Summary

- The 2025 Beijing Victory Day celebrations spectacularly signalled the deepening of cooperation between China, Russia and North Korea, becoming a symbol of joint action against US hegemony.
- The common interest of the Beijing–Moscow–Pyongyang trio is to curb American influence and promote a multipolar world order, but due to their differing goals and political cultures, there is still no complete unity between the three countries.
- North Korea's goal is to secure regime survival, reduce its dependence on China and increase the country's international room for manoeuvre, which it achieves by skilfully exploiting Russian-Chinese rivalry.
- Russia uses Pyongyang as a tactical tool to divert American attention and, since the escalation of the war in Ukraine, has also relied on it as a military ally, while strengthening the DPRK through technological cooperation.
- China is once again drawing closer to North Korea in order to maintain regional stability and its own influence, as Pyongyang is important to Beijing as a buffer state and strategic ally against the US-Japan-South Korea triangle.
- In the current situation, the triangle is more of a network of three bilateral relationships than a real alliance, but with growing international tensions, it could easily turn into institutionalised military-political cooperation.

The Chinese-Russian-North Korean harmony spectacularly demonstrated at the 2025 Beijing Victory Day celebrations suggests that the three countries are increasingly acting in concert against the United States and its allies. The three players partly share strategic interests – primarily limiting American hegemony and promoting a multipolar world order – but there are also differences between them. North Korea's main goal is to ensure the survival of its regime and increase its room for manoeuvre by exploiting Russian-Chinese competition; for Russia, its relationship with Pyongyang is a tactical tool to counterbalance Western pressure; while China sees the North Korea as a strategic buffer state and partner in the East Asian security balance. The trilateral relationship is currently more of a network of intersecting bilateral relationships than a genuine tripartite alliance, but it could easily develop into institutionalised cooperation if global bloc formation intensifies.

1. Introduction

The ceremony held in Beijing in September 2025 to mark the 80th anniversary of the victory over Japan in World War II had two distinguished guests of honour: Russian President Vladimir Putin and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un. The former sat to Xi Jinping's right and the latter to his left in the VIP box, and the three of them were at the centre of events throughout the ceremony. The joint

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entrance of the three leaders and their informal conversation – which was leaked to the international press through an interpreter's microphone that had been left on – were among the moments that attracted the most attention worldwide.²

The fact that Putin and Kim were singled out by the Chinese organisers from among the twenty-odd participating heads of state and government can be explained by historical reasons. Like the Chinese, the Koreans were victims of Japanese aggression, Korean and Chinese communist partisans fought together against the occupiers, and the war ended at the same time in both countries. The Russians (Soviets) participated militarily in the liberation of both Northeast China and North Korea in the final weeks of the war, thus playing an active role in Japan's defeat.³ The joint celebration is therefore partly based on shared bloodshed. However, the main reason for placing the Xi-Putin-Kim trio at the centre of the VIP box is not history, but current international politics. The appearance of the three leaders side by side was a clear message, the main target of which was the Western world, which often mistakenly identifies itself with international public opinion. Placing the trio at the centre was intended to demonstrate that neither Vladimir Putin nor Kim Jong-un are isolated from the international community: although both are considered pariahs in the Western world, the rest of the world – led by China, the second largest economic and political power – does not distance itself from them. Most countries in the world are therefore not interested in Western sanctions and moral scruples. On the other hand, the appearance of the three leaders clearly signalled that they are ready to act together on certain issues – primarily, of course, in dismantling American hegemony and transforming the unipolar world order into a multipolar one, i.e. offering an alternative to the Western-dominated world order. This signal is, of course, addressed not only to the West, but also to the countries of the global South, for whom Beijing, Moscow and Pyongyang wish to become symbols of independent development and the preservation of sovereignty.⁴

The well-choreographed joint appearance of Xi, Putin and Kim raises the question of the extent to which the three countries they represent actually cooperate in reality. According to some Western analysts, a new axis is forming, involving China, Russia and North Korea – with Iran often added to the list.⁵ This formation is referred to by various names: CRINK (China, Russia, Iran, North Korea), the “axis of upheaval”, the “axis of autocracies”, the “quartet of chaos” or the “deadly quartet”, etc. These names are, of course, primarily journalistic devices, but they clearly indicate that certain countries, with China as their informal leader, are becoming increasingly active in seeking to rewrite the existing international rules. However, whether the “axis of upheaval” actually exists and, if so, what kind of “upheaval” it aims to achieve, is a highly controversial issue.

In any case, it is indisputable that, at least at the bilateral level, the countries in question are working more and more closely together. This is particularly true of the China-Russia-North Korea trio, which points towards the formation of a new East Asian triangle. In the following, we will attempt to explore the dynamics of this triangle that have unfolded in recent years. This analysis does not discuss Sino-Russian relations in detail, as this would require a separate study.⁶ Instead, we will focus on the trends unfolding around North Korea and their regional and global implications.

² NAGY, Angelina – SALÁT, Gergely: [Kim Jong Un Takes the Stage: A New Chapter in Relations between China and North Korea](#). *Perspective, Hungarian Institute of International Affairs*, 2025.09.24. [Online, 2025.10.31.]; ATKINSON, Emily: [Hot mic catches Xi and Putin discussing organ transplants and immortality](#). *BBC News*, 2025.09.03. [Online, 2025.10.31.]

³ PREFER, Nathan N.: [The Soviet Invasion of Manchuria led to Japan's Greatest Defeat](#). *WWII Quarterly*, Vol. 9, No. 3, Spring 2018. [Online, 31 October 2025.]

⁴ SHARP, Alexandra: [China's Military Parade Sends a Pointed Message to the West](#). *Foreign Policy*, 3 September 2025. [Online, 31 October 2025.]

⁵ STENT, Angela: [The CRINK: Inside the New Bloc Supporting Russia's War Against Ukraine](#). *Atlantic Council, Issue Brief*, 23 October 2025. [Online, 31 October 2025]; COONAN, Anni: [CRINK: The Strategic Limits of the New "Axis of Upheaval". Stepwise Risk Outlook](#), 18 July 2025. [Online, 31 October 2025.]

⁶ See, for example, ESZTERHAI Viktor: [Az orosz-kínai tengely az ukrajnai háború tükrében](#). *Külügyi Szemle*, Vol. 21, No. 2, 2022, pp. 43–66. [Online, 2025.10.31.]; ESZTERHAI Viktor: [Trump mint fordított Nixon – Szétválasztható-e Kína és Oroszország?](#). *John Lukacs Világrend Elemzések*, 2025/3, 2025.04.10. [Online, 2025.10.31.]

2. Strategic interests

Before presenting recent developments, it is worth reviewing the fundamental strategic interests of the three actors on the Korean peninsula. These interests determine the behaviour of the countries beyond the immediate events and make their decisions more understandable.⁷

2.1. North Korea

The primary goal of the leadership of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) is regime security, i.e. the survival of the system and the retention of power. This is true of all political systems, of course, but it is particularly pronounced in North Korea: the question of survival – precisely because it is by no means self-evident – overrides everything else. Historical experience shows that the fall of such rigid systems is usually accompanied by the physical destruction of a large part of the political elite, so retaining power is not “merely” a political issue for those who run the regime, but also an existential one.⁸

Survival requires, first and foremost, that the internal system remain intact, i.e. that North Korean society not be affected by external influences that could call into question the legitimacy of the leadership. In practice, this means maintaining a totalitarian regime and a policy of isolation – not only from South Korea and developed Western countries, but also, to some extent, from China and Russia. Theoretically, it is possible that reforms similar to those seen in China and Vietnam in the 1980s could be introduced in North Korea, but this would entail extraordinary risks. Although a “softer” and more open reformist communist system may seem attractive from the outside, the reality is that the North Korean regime is unreformable, because if any kind of opening up were to take place and the population's freedom were to increase, people would quickly realise that, contrary to propaganda claims, they do not live in the best possible world and have been misled for decades. It is no coincidence that Pyongyang has never attempted any real reforms.⁹

Secondly, in order to maintain regime security, it is essential to protect the country's sovereignty, i.e. to ensure that North Korea is not attacked by external military forces and that there is no other interference in its internal affairs. Although there does not currently appear to be a realistic threat of aggression against the DPRK in the foreseeable future, the Pyongyang leadership is thinking long term and is well aware of what happened to the regimes of Saddam Hussein in Iraq and Muammar Gaddafi in Libya, for example.¹⁰ There is no guarantee that American interventionism or democracy export policies will not return in the future, so the regime's main external goal is to avert this possibility. The long-term goal is to end the Korean War, which has been legally ongoing since 1950, by concluding a peace treaty and gaining international recognition of the DPRK as a nuclear power.¹¹ This goal is also served by continuous provocations, through which the country seeks to remain the focus of international public attention and force the outside world to deal with the situation in Korea. This strategy strengthens the regime's internal and external legitimacy, as it presents Pyongyang as a player of global significance, which significantly increases its room for manoeuvre. The country is therefore doing everything it can to deter the United States and its allies from any possible intervention, and its nuclear and missile programmes essen-

⁷ SALÁT Gergely: Amikor bálnák küzdenek... A koreai válságban közvetlenül érintett államok stratégiai érdekei és lehetőségei. In SALÁT Gergely, SZAKÁLI Máté, SZILÁGYI Zsolt (szerk.): *Veszélyes vizeken. Konfliktusok és biztonsági fenyegetések a Távol-Keleten*. Budapest: Typotex, 2019, pp. 13–42

⁸ LANKOV, Andrei: [Why Nothing Can Really Be Done about North Korea's Nuclear Programme](#). *Asia Policy*, No. 23, January 2017, pp. 104–110. [Online, 31 October 2025.]

⁹ LANKOV, Andrei – GONCHAROV, Dmitri: ['North Korea's Ruling Elite Is Convinced that Serious Political Liberalisation Will Mean Collective Suicide'](#). *Russia.Post*, 23 June 2025. [Online, 31 October 2025.]

¹⁰ BOWEN, Wyn – MORAN, Matthew: [What North Korea Learned from Libya's Decision to Give Up Nuclear Weapons](#). *The Conversation*, 11 May 2018. [Online, 31 October 2025.]

¹¹ LAWRENCE, Susan V. – NIKITIN, Mary Beth D. – MANYIN, Mark E.: [A Peace Treaty with North Korea?](#) *Congressional Research Service (CRS Report)*, 19 April 2018. [Online, 31 October 2025.]

tially serve this purpose. From time to time, it is suggested that Pyongyang's goal is to reunify the peninsula under its own leadership, but the regime is probably aware of the unreality of this (it is no coincidence that at the end of 2023, Kim Jong-un publicly renounced reunification).¹²

Another way to guarantee security, beyond developing military capabilities, is to seek external allies. For North Korea, this could logically be China and Russia, but Pyongyang's manoeuvres clearly show that the leadership does not fully trust either of its northern neighbours. During the more than two thousand years of Chinese-Korean relations, a number of negative historical experiences have been accumulated, and the continued "goodwill" of Russia is also questionable. The search for external alliances cannot therefore replace a strategy based on self-reliance and the development of self-defence capabilities, but it can significantly expand Pyongyang's room for manoeuvre.¹³

Finally, the regime's survival requires a minimum level of economic stability and the provision of basic supplies to the population, which is crucial for its internal legitimacy. Although the country strives for self-sufficiency, there are serious limitations to this, and Pyongyang therefore needs help from the outside world. Once again, China and Russia play a major role in this area, keeping the North Korean economy alive with aid, trade opportunities, investments and the reception of guest workers, despite UN sanctions.¹⁴ In the past, North Korea also used its weapons programme to extort economic aid from American allies, receiving economic support from South Korea and other Western countries in exchange for certain concessions, such as refraining from nuclear tests.¹⁵ However, since the second half of the 2010s, when its partners recognised this tactic and it became clear to them that North Korea was unwilling to give up its nuclear weapons for anything, this function of the programme ceased to exist.

2.2. China

China has several interrelated interests on the Korean peninsula.¹⁶ The most important of these is that North Korea remain a buffer state between the People's Republic of China and the Republic of Korea. The latter is an ally of the United States, with tens of thousands of American troops stationed there. If North Korea were to cease to exist and the peninsula were to be unified under South Korean control, American troops could appear on China's land borders – which would be a strategic nightmare for any great power. It was precisely to prevent this that China intervened in the Korean War in 1950 and signed a mutual defence treaty with North Korea in 1961 (to this day, the DPRK remains China's only military ally). As the basic situation has not changed since then, Beijing continues to view North Korea as a classic buffer state, whose existence guarantees its own security. This explains why China supports the regime's survival in various ways, even when it comes into conflict with it, for example when it conducts nuclear or missile tests despite China's disapproval. Pyongyang consciously exploits this attitude, as it is aware that at the end of the day it can always count on Chinese support.¹⁷

Another fundamental interest of China is maintaining stability on the Korean peninsula. The collapse or transformation of the North Korean regime is hardly conceivable without armed conflict and internal power struggles. Such a chaotic situation could result in American intervention and weapons of mass destruction falling into unreliable hands, as well as hundreds of thousands or even millions of refugees heading for Northeast China, which is already struggling with economic difficulties. Beijing is trying to avoid all this, which is why it is striving to keep the current North Korean regime in place for as long as

¹² KIM, Jeongmin: [Why North Korea Declared Unification 'Impossible,' Abandoning Decades-Old Goal](#). *NK News*, 1 January 2024. [Online, 31 October 2025.]

¹³ WISHNICK, Elizabeth: [Russia-China-North Korea Relations: Obstacles to a Trilateral Axis](#). *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, 15 March 2025. [Online, 31 October 2025.]

¹⁴ YU, Woo-ik – HAHN, Bae-ho: [Economy of North Korea](#). *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 1 November 2025. [Online, 31 October 2025.]

¹⁵ VOLPE, Tristan: [The Unravelling of North Korea's Proliferation Blackmail Strategy](#). *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, published by Georgetown University Press, 10 April 2017. [Online, 31 October 2025.]

¹⁶ FONG, Clara: [The China-North Korea Relationship](#). *Council on Foreign Relations (Background)*, 21 November 2024. [Online, 31 October 2025.]

¹⁷ CHEN, Yu-Hua: Lips and Teeth: China's Buffer Thinking Toward North Korea. *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 33, No. 149, 2023, pp. 839–849.

possible – the Chinese traditionally try to avoid any unpredictable situation, so it is in their interest to ensure the survival of the Kim regime, however problematic it may be.¹⁸

Thirdly, China also has economic interests in North Korea. The DPRK has significant mineral resources that are much needed by Chinese industry, and in the current situation, China can access these resources relatively easily and cheaply. Although China's policy towards Korea is not fundamentally driven by economic considerations, these do play a role in its specific actions.¹⁹

2.3. Russia

North Korea is much less important to Moscow than it is to China, and the Russian leadership is not particularly concerned about the stability of the Korean peninsula. China and Russia have significantly different mentalities when it comes to international affairs: while the Chinese try to avoid conflicts, uncertain situations, and unpredictable outcomes, and generally strive for stability, Russia traditionally views stirring up trouble and exploiting the resulting opportunities as a tactical tool. This also applies to the Korean peninsula, where Moscow is not particularly bothered by Pyongyang's provocative actions.²⁰

The Kremlin can use the Pyongyang regime to exert pressure and strengthen its own bargaining position, for example by escalating tensions on the Korean peninsula when it suits its interests, thereby diverting the attention of the United States. Pyongyang's importance to Russia has grown in recent years as it has actively supported Russian war efforts since the escalation of the war in Ukraine in 2022.²¹ Over the past decades, the DPRK has accumulated a huge amount of ammunition, weapons and other military equipment compatible with Russian systems, a legacy of the Cold War, some of which Pyongyang has made available to the Russians. Moreover, as is well known, North Korean soldiers have also appeared on the Ukrainian front.²² The impact of all this on the outcome of the war is likely to be negligible, but it may contribute somewhat to reducing Russian losses and alleviating the burden of the war on Russian society and the economy. For this reason, and also to counterbalance the US-Japan-South Korea triad in the Far East, Moscow has an interest in the survival of the Pyongyang regime, although it is much less concerned about regional stability than China. This also means that the Russians are likely to turn a blind eye to Korean provocations more easily than the Chinese.

3. Recent developments

Based on the above, it is clear that the interests of China, Russia and North Korea overlap to a certain extent. Their common goals include, first and foremost, ensuring the survival of the Pyongyang regime, preventing the strengthening of American positions, and, in the longer term, eroding the global dominance of the United States. At the same time, there are also differences, which is why we cannot speak of a complete unity of interests in the case of the Beijing-Moscow-Pyongyang axis.

One of the most important features of the DPRK's foreign policy since the 1950s has been its attempt to play its allies off against each other, thus ensuring itself the greatest possible room for manoeuvre. Since Kim Jong-un's grandfather, Kim Il-sung, the North Korean leadership has been moving closer to either Moscow or Beijing, but when dependence on one side becomes too strong, it strengthens its ties with the other. In this way, it manages to maintain a certain degree of independence, even though, based on power relations alone, it could only be a vassal of one of the superpowers. Moscow and Beijing

¹⁸ LUO, Shuxian: [China's North Korea Problem](#). *Foreign Affairs*, 21 August 2025. [Online, 31 October 2025.]

¹⁹ KIM, GyuBeom: [Constraints and Prospects of North Korea-China Economic Cooperation](#). *Sejong Policy Brief*, No. 2024-22, 16 December 2024. [Online, 31 October 2025.]

²⁰ SHOVKAT, Shamuratov: [Pragmatic Trio: China, Russia, North Korea's Triangle of Convenience](#). *Asia Times*, 10 October 2025. [Online, 31 October 2025.]

²¹ KOVSH, Andrey – OUELLETTE, Dean J.: [The Revitalising Russia-North Korea Relations: Toward a New Order?](#) *The Pacific Review*, September 2025, pp. 1–28. [Online, 31 October 2025.]

²² CSOMA Mózes: [Észak-koreai katonák az orosz-ukrán fronton](#). *John Lukacs Stratégiai Védelmi Kutatási Elemzések*, 2025/1, 2025.01.14. [Online, 2025.10.31.]

have clearly recognised this balancing policy over time, but the survival of the Pyongyang regime is more important to them than exercising complete control over it, so they seem to be able to live with it.²³

3.1. Russia and North Korea: from partners to allies

North Korea continues its policy of balancing between the two great powers under Kim Jong-un. Since the 1990s, the regime has become increasingly dependent on China, with more than 90% of its trade conducted with China and most of its investments coming from there. In the years following his rise to power in 2011, Kim Jong-un sought to loosen North Korea's dependence on China, at least on the political level. One sign of this was his execution of his influential uncle, who had maintained close ties with Beijing.²⁴ During this period, Sino-North Korean political relations reached a low point, and the first summit between Kim Jong-un and Xi Jinping did not take place until 2018. This was followed by four further personal meetings within a year, signalling a radical change. The COVID-19 pandemic then prevented the new direction from unfolding, and from 2020 onwards, both political and economic relations were reduced to a minimum for several years.²⁵ The North Korean regime sought to prevent the virus from entering the country by completely closing its borders, as it was aware that, given its weakened population and under-developed healthcare system, such an epidemic could have devastating consequences and threaten political stability. North Korea therefore closed itself off more than ever before, even sealing its border with China. At the same time, it seemed that the Korean issue had temporarily disappeared from the international agenda.²⁶

The 2022 Russian offensive against Ukraine fundamentally changed North Korea's situation, and the Pyongyang leadership made every effort to take advantage of the developments to increase its international room for manoeuvre.²⁷ Pyongyang decided that it was in North Korea's best interests to stand fully behind Russia. At the outset of the war, the North Korean press blamed the United States' hegemonic ambitions for the outbreak of the conflict in Ukraine, and in March 2022, North Korea became one of the few countries – alongside Russia, Belarus, Eritrea and Syria – that voted against the resolution condemning Russia.²⁸ Russia's other partners, such as China, took a much more cautious stance, typically abstaining. In June 2022, North Korea, together with Russia and Syria, recognised the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics. The first reports of arms and ammunition deals between Moscow and Pyongyang emerged in the autumn of that year.²⁹

In September 2023, bilateral relations reached a new level: Kim Jong-un visited the Russian Far East, where he met Vladimir Putin in person. This was followed in June 2024 by Putin's visit to Pyongyang, during which a "comprehensive strategic partnership agreement" was signed.³⁰ As the parties promised to come to each other's aid in the event of aggression, the two countries officially became military allies. Russia has thus committed itself to defending North Korea in the event of an external attack, which naturally greatly encourages the North Korean leadership, which is almost constantly testing various weapons.

²³ ISOZAKI, Atsuhito: [Eyes on the Great Powers: How North Korea Navigates China, Russia and the US](#). *ThinkChina*, 25 September 2025. [Online, 31 October 2025.]

²⁴ NEUMAN, Scott: [Ouster of North Korea's Jang Noted with Unease in China](#). *NPR*, 2013.12.10. [Online, 2025.10.31.]

²⁵ FROHMAN, Ben – RAFAELOF, Emma – DALE-HUANG, Alexis: [The China–North Korea Strategic Rift: Background and Implications for the United States](#). *U.S.–China Economic and Security Review Commission*, 24 January 2022. [Online, 31 October 2025.]

²⁶ CSOMA Mózes: *Phenjani exodus*. Budapest: L'Harmattan Kiadó, 2023.

²⁷ CSOMA Mózes: [Az orosz–ukrán háború és a Koreai-félsziget](#). *Stratégiai Védelmi Kutató Központ Elemzések*, No. 14, 2022, pp. 1–12. [Online, 2025.10.31.]

²⁸ UN News: [General Assembly Resolution Demands End to Russian Offensive in Ukraine](#). *United Nations*, 2022.03.02. [Online, 2025.10.31.]

²⁹ HOWELL, Edward: [North Korea and Russia's Dangerous Partnership](#). *Chatham House*, 4 December 2024. [Online, 31 October 2025.]

³⁰ KCNA: [DPRK–Russia Treaty on Comprehensive Strategic Partnership](#). *Korean Central News Agency*, 2024.06.20. [Online, 2025.10.31.]

In addition, Moscow is likely to pay for its support of Russian efforts in Ukraine in part with military technology, giving the North Korean army even more powerful weapons.³¹

In October 2024, North Korean soldiers reportedly appeared on the Ukrainian front, meaning that Pyongyang is now supporting Russia with manpower in addition to ammunition and weapons shipments. Although this fact was not acknowledged for a long time, in September 2025, during the celebrations in Beijing, Vladimir Putin personally thanked Kim Jong-un for the Korean assistance provided to the Russian army.³²

At first glance, this can be interpreted as a natural alignment of autocracies, but in reality, it is more a case of the war in Ukraine creating new opportunities for North Korea. On the one hand, by strengthening its ties with Russia, Pyongyang can reduce its dependence on China, i.e. return to its traditional balancing policy. On the other hand, the war also provided an opportunity to break out of its previous international isolation. By the second half of the 2010s, North Korea had manoeuvred itself into a position where even its closest partners, China and Russia, voted for and partially complied with UN sanctions against it. This situation has now changed radically: Russia has not only normalised its relations with Pyongyang, but has also become its military ally. As a result, it is clear that Moscow will not vote for any sanctions against North Korea in the UN Security Council in the future. Thirdly, Pyongyang receives technological assistance from the Russians to modernise its army – and, last but not least, it has also secured military protection for itself from Moscow.

3.2. China and North Korea: partners in global games

In parallel with the above, China's attitude towards North Korea has also changed.³³ Between 2006 and 2017, Beijing voted in favour of all sanctions against the DPRK in the UN Security Council, and although it did not sever economic ties, it contributed politically to the isolation of Pyongyang. Xi Jinping was apparently irritated by the fact that North Korea and the much younger Kim Jong-un had become too independent and did not consult with him on issues such as nuclear and missile tests. As we have seen, this began to change in the late 2010s, clearly not unrelated to the fact that Donald Trump met Kim Jong-un three times in person and China did not want US-North Korea relations to slip out of its control. As a result, five Xi-Kim summits took place in 2018-2019.³⁴ In 2022, China did not vote in favour of the sanctions draft submitted by the Americans in the UN Security Council.³⁵ After the lifting of COVID-19 pandemic restrictions, Chinese-North Korean economic relations began to recover, and to signal a political restart, as mentioned earlier, Kim Jong-un was not only invited to the 2025 Beijing parade, but was also treated as the other guest of honour alongside Vladimir Putin, ensuring him the greatest possible publicity and recognition. The day after the parade, Xi Jinping held bilateral talks with him, during which he made gestures – such as having a tea together – that would have been unthinkable for a long time. Contrary to all previous occasions, the statements issued after the meeting did not mention China's support for the denuclearisation of the Korean peninsula, which is also an important gesture.³⁶

The rapprochement between China and North Korea is not only political but also economic.³⁷ According to available data, trade between the two countries has increased significantly in recent times, new

³¹ CSOMA Mózes: [Vlagyimir Putyin phenjani villámlátogatása](#). *Stratégiai Védelmi Kutatási Elemzések*, 2024/11, 2024.06.25. [Online, 2025.10.31.]

³² MACKINTOSH, Thomas – MACKENZIE, Jean: [Putin Thanks Kim for North Koreans Fighting in Ukraine](#). *BBC News*, 3 September 2025. [Online, 31 October 2025.]

³³ PRATHIBHA, M. S.: [China's Contentious Relationship with North Korea: Recent Developments](#). *Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (Issue Brief)*, 1 October 2025. [Online, 31 October 2025.]

³⁴ KIM, Heung-kyu: [China's Evolving North Korea Policy](#). *Focus Asia: Perspective & Analysis*, April 2020. [Online, 31 October 2025.]

³⁵ United Nations Security Council: [Security Council Fails to Adopt Resolution Tightening Sanctions Regime in Democratic People's Republic of Korea, as Two Members Wield Veto](#). *UN Press Release SC/14911*, 2022.05.26. [Online, 2025.10.31.]

³⁶ GAN, Nectar – SEO, Yoonjung: [Kim Has Long Sought Recognition as a Nuclear Power. Xi May Have Just Given It to Him](#). *CNN*, 10 September 2025. [Online, 31 October 2025.]

³⁷ SHARMA, Abhishek: [China-North Korea Ties: Old Allies, New Calculations](#). *Observer Research Foundation (Expert Speak – Raisina Debates)*, 16 October 2025. [Online, 31 October 2025.]

border crossings are being built, and new Chinese investments have appeared in the DPRK.³⁸ China clearly does not want North Korea, which it traditionally considers part of its sphere of influence, to fall too far under Russia's influence and possibly cooperate with Moscow against Chinese interests in the future. This also draws attention to the fact that while relations between China and Russia have reached a historically unprecedented high level, and the strategic partnership between the two Eurasian powers is stable and lasting, there is also competition between the parties beneath the surface, and the trust between Moscow and Beijing is not unconditional. These fault lines should not be overestimated, but their existence is worth recognising.

As the events of September 2025 show, China has now spectacularly abandoned its reservations about North Korea and openly embraces the partnership. In the words of Xi Jinping, China and the DPRK are "good neighbours, good friends and good comrades" – a significant change from Beijing's previous consistent voting in favour of sanctions against Pyongyang and its occasional open criticism of North Korea for its provocative behaviour. Although the desire to counterbalance Russia plays a role in this shift, there is probably more to it than that.³⁹

In recent years, China's foreign policy has taken a new direction. Until the end of the 2010s, Beijing sought to avoid open conflict with the United States and the Western world and to allay fears that China was seeking to change the world order, but it has now become clear that these conciliatory efforts have failed. The American political elite and the main players in its ally system view China as a challenger, regardless of its specific actions. Although Beijing would like to present itself as a status quo power, its rivals view it as revisionist. China was already identified as a systemic rival in the first Trump administration's national security strategy, and this view has not changed since then. It would have been more advantageous for China if the confrontation with the West had only intensified later, allowing it to use the opportunities offered by the current world order to strengthen itself in the meantime. However, by 2018 at the latest, when the US-China trade war broke out, it became clear that this conflict was inevitable and would occur sooner than expected. Frictions were exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, and then further worsened by Russia's aggression against Ukraine, in which Western decision-makers clearly see China as Moscow's most important supporter. In an international environment reminiscent of the Cold War⁴⁰, it has become vital for China to find, if not formal allies, then at least cooperative partners, so that it does not have to face the American alliance system, which has been in place for almost eight decades, alone.⁴¹

One relatively certain point in all this is China's only military ally, North Korea. The country's strategic location, traditional anti-American and anti-Japanese stance, and economic dependence on China make Pyongyang increasingly valuable to Beijing in an increasingly tense international environment, despite the regime's occasional excesses. China is in an unfavourable strategic position in Northeast Asia, as the region's two other economic centres, Japan and South Korea, are allies of the United States, and American troops are stationed on their territory. The US-Japan-South Korea triangle was originally created to counterbalance the Soviet Union, but its main task today is to limit China's influence, which the Chinese are well aware of.

In this situation, it is advantageous for China to have an ally in the centre of the region, North Korea, which it can use against its rivals if necessary.⁴² As long as the competition between the two superpower blocs did not intensify, Beijing tried from time to time to distance itself from its problematic

³⁸ FUJIMURA, Kohei – TAJIMA, Yukio: [China Trade with North Korea Jumps as Neighbours Rebuild Economic Ties](#). *Nikkei Asia*, 19 July 2025. [Online, 31 October 2025.]

³⁹ LEE, Liz: [China's Xi Seeks Closer Coordination with North Korea in Meeting with Kim](#). *Reuters*, 4 September 2025. [Online, 31 October 2025.]

⁴⁰ KUSAI Sándor Zoltán: *Az új hidegháború kérdéséről. Külügyi Szemle*, Vol. 20, No. 2, 2021, pp. 3–21.

⁴¹ YU, Jie: [China 'Under Siege': How the US's Hardening China Policy Is Seen in Beijing](#). *EuroHub4Sino Policy Paper*, No. 2024/8, 25 July 2024. [Online, 31 October 2025]; LI, Meiting: [China's Foreign Policy in Xi's Era: Change and Continuity](#). *UP CIDS Discussion Paper*, No. 2019-05, 2019. [Online, 31 October 2025.]

⁴² CHA, Victor – LIN, Bonny – LIM, Andy – TINSLEY, Truly: [Renewed China-DPRK Diplomacy: Symbolism or Substance?](#). *Beyond Parallel, Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)*, 13 October 2025. [Online, 31 October 2025.]

north-eastern neighbour, which often threatened the stability of the region. However, with the intensification of global confrontation, China is now willing to accept the reputation cost caused by cooperation with Pyongyang, as strategic considerations take precedence over *soft power* considerations in the current situation.

China is also in an unfavourable position because, unlike the American system of alliances – where the loyalty of allies can basically be counted on despite all problems – there are hardly any countries in the world that would openly commit themselves to China. Due to its own foreign policy doctrine, Beijing has no official military allies, with the sole exception of North Korea.⁴³ Most of China's partners seek to balance between the major power blocs and do not wish to side completely with one or the other. For this reason, Beijing has visibly strengthened its ties in recent years with those states that are willing to openly commit to China. In global competition, small factors can often determine which side gains the upper hand. China cannot afford to give up any partner willing to stand by it – this explains the current rapprochement between Beijing and Pyongyang.

4. Prospects for the Beijing–Moscow–Pyongyang triangle

China's main partner in counterbalancing the American federal system is, of course, not the DPRK, but Russia. The interests of Moscow and Beijing in global politics coincide to a large extent, as Western pressure poses an existential threat to both of them. It is a logical choice for them to try to counter this threat together. This means that the two countries ignore any possible sources of conflict between them, as their interests are aligned on the truly important strategic issues.

The natural aspiration of the Beijing–Moscow axis is to gather around itself all those states that also see Western political and economic practices as an existential threat. To this end, they are working on broader cooperation with countries that see the erosion of American hegemony and the creation of a multipolar world as an opportunity to increase their room for manoeuvre. Examples of such broader cooperation platforms include the BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). However, their impact is limited, as most of the states participating in them do not wish to commit themselves fully to the Beijing–Moscow axis, but rather seek to manoeuvre between the great powers. China and Russia are therefore seeking to establish a narrower, closer circle of cooperation with countries that openly pursue anti-American policies. Currently, this circle mainly includes North Korea and Iran, along with a few smaller players such as Bashar al-Assad's Syria once was.

In terms of Northeast Asia, this means that the US–Japan–South Korea triangle has been counterbalanced by a China–Russia–North Korea triangle, which has led to a spectacular rise in Pyongyang's importance. At the same time, this poses a serious security risk, as, on the one hand, the DPRK can now obtain cutting-edge military equipment from Russia that it did not have access to before, and, on the other hand, with Russian and Chinese support, it can carry out weapons tests and other provocative actions with much greater confidence.⁴⁴ Although it does not seek to start a nuclear war, as this would lead to the complete destruction of the country and the regime, miscalculations can easily make the situation spiral out of control.

The question is whether the current Chinese–Russian–North Korean triangle will eventually transform into genuine trilateral cooperation. At present, it is more accurate to speak of three bilateral relationships, in which Russia and China compete with each other in many respects in North Korea, while Pyongyang seeks to exploit this competition to increase its own room for manoeuvre.⁴⁵ It is likely that this dynamic will continue for some time, at least until the international situation becomes extremely tense. However, if global tensions continue to rise, it is conceivable that the Beijing–Moscow–Pyongyang trio will coordinate their cooperation more closely and form an actual alliance. This development would take the current trend towards bloc formation to a new level.

⁴³ ZHANG, Ketian: [Alliances with Chinese Characteristics? The Contents and Rationale of China's Strategic Partnerships](#). *International Politics*, 2 June 2025. [Online, 31 October 2025.]

⁴⁴ SIMPSON, Adam: [The Russia–Ukraine War Has Made North Korea More Dangerous](#). *The Diplomat*, 14 August 2025. [Online, 31 October 2025.]

⁴⁵ WISHNICK, Elizabeth: [Russia–China–North Korea Relations: Obstacles to a Trilateral Axis](#). *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, 15 March 2025. [Online, 31 October 2025.]



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