Redistributing Influence

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Russia's Shifting Influence on the Korean Peninsula:
From Seoul to Pyongyang

Since the end of the Cold war, Russia's foreign policy has been focused on international partnerships, combining economic and geopolitical flexibility. In the case of the Korean Peninsula, Moscow deepened relations with South Korea and weakened the relations with North Korea -which ones aided to win the Korean war, 1953. For decades, Seoul and Moscow became great economic allies. However, the conflict in Ukraine has effectively extended into Asia by reshaping alliance structures and security dynamics on the Korean Peninsula. Russia's war in Ukraine shaped its global partners and accelerated a strategic realignment in Northeast Asia. As global sanctions and geopolitical tensions arose, relations with South Korea deteriorated, creating a shift in Russia's foreign policy and getting closer to North Korea.

This paper argues that Russia has not been losing influence, it has been redistributing it. The Korean peninsula is only one example of partnership deterioration and Moscow moving forward to a more politically aligned and strategic partnership. It illustrates how Russia is reshaping its influence under conditions of international pressure. Hence, this change is not limited to Northeast Asia. Moscow has increased engagement with countries such as Iran and Belarus, where political alignment and an anti US view is shared. From these perspectives, the shift in the Korean peninsula is not isolated, it is part of a wider Eurasian realignment that is reshaping Moscow's foreign influence.

Russia–South Korea Relations after the Cold War

South Korea shifted their geopolitical alignment and started to grow political and economic ties with Russia in the 90s. It was a way to diversify its partnerships and not expand their economies ties besides the United States. Moreover, Moscow was not only economically attractive, it was also a strategic partner for the stability of the Korean Peninsula. Russia was perceived as a potential actor that could be able to moderate North Korea's strategy and nuclear plan.

In the 1990s Moscow and Seoul established formal diplomatic relations. In 2008, the formal diplomacy was elevated to a "strategic cooperative

partnership", and four years later Russia was South Korea's 11th largest trade partner. Some of the most important *chaebol* –Hunday, Samsung, Lotte, LG, among others- established a strong presence in Russia (Roehrig, 2022, p. 867). In 2014, following Moscow's annexation of Crimea, the world started to distance itself from Moscow and international and economic sanctions were imposed on Russia (Kruk, 2019, para. 1).

The year before, South Korea's president, Park Geun-hye had launched the Eurasia Initiative, a far-reaching plan to establish energy, communication, and economic networks to link Russia, China, the two Koreas, and Central Asia (Presidential Archives of Korea, 2013, para. 2). In the wake of Crimea, Seoul faced considerable pressure to leave these initiatives and join the western coalition. Park administration supported a draft resolution that reaffirmed Ukraine's sovereignty and proclaimed that the referendum to leave Ukraine and join Russia had no validity, by that time South Korea was a rotating member of the UN Security Council at that time (United Nations Security Council, 2014, p. 1-12). In addition, the Park administration released a statement about being concerned about the latest developments in Ukraine and the false referendum. Seoul was able to keep a low profile and maintain balance between the United States and keeping economic ties with Russia. Nevertheless, South Korea's president Park Geun-hye, decided to focus on the ongoing relationship with Moscow rather than follow international sanctions (Snyder, 2022, para.3).

However, after the events of 2022 partnerships changed. The invasion of Ukraine was far more horrendous than the 2014 annexation of Crimea. Trying to follow Park's administration steps, President Moon focused on a cautious response towards Russia, trying again to protect economic interest and preserve the aid from Moscow with North Korea (Roehrig, 2022, p. 866-892). The war with Ukraine was a distant conflict, so it seemed that Seoul could keep its low profile again. However, this approach was challenged from inside and outside the country. Different demonstrations against the government's positions and the pressure from the United States, led the South Korea government to apply for economic sanctions that would punish Russia for its actions (Haggard, 2022, para2).

The result of these sanctions and publicly aligning with the West had been mixed. While the economic impact on South Korea was relatively limited -nowadays, Russia is South Korea's 12th largest trade partner, but only accounts for 2.2% of South Korea's total trade- the political consequences were a bit more significant. Seoul ended its long standing strategy to maintain a good balance between Moscow and Washington (Roehrig, 2022, p. 866-892).

Russia's reaction weakened even more the bilateral ties. Moscow defined South Korea as an "unfriendly state", a classification used with all the countries that apply sanctions against Russia. South Korea was no longer viewed as an economic partner, it was a politically aligned actor within a Western led bloc (Kim, 2024, para 3). At the same time, Russia started to

shift its influence in Northeast Asia. Since the relations with South Korea had weakened, Moscow turned towards a different partner, a state outside the Western sanctions framework. The shift demonstrated a wider transformation in Russia's foreign policy orientation. Since 2022, Moscow has increased its focus on diversifying its partnerships, leaning towards more politically isolated and authoritarian states that share its opposition to Western influence. North Korea emerged as an interesting partner since it would not only be willing to support Russia diplomatically, but also to challenge US aligned actors in the region (Snyder, 2022, para.4).

The shift and the weakening of Russia- South Korea relations cannot be only understood in economic terms. It demonstrates a deeper geopolitical realignment, where Moscow has moved away from western-aligned states towards partners that share strategic interests and mutual isolation. It marks the end of the post Cold War phase, no longer being relative openness and flexibility, it changes to a more polarized and bloc oriented approach to international relations.

Russia and North Korea: The Return of Strategic Cooperation

In the 1990s the relationship between the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) and Russia deteriorated and moved to a secondary importance. In the post Cold War period, Moscow focused on states that were more economically and politically dynamic. However, the war in Ukraine created a new strategic value of Russia's partnerships, specially in the Korean peninsula. For the DPRK it created a new opportunity to engage with Russia in new geopolitical conditions.

Following the invasion in 2022, Russia faced unprecedented levels of economic and diplomatic isolation around the globe, but especially from Western countries. North Korea became an alternative partner capable of operating outside of Western dominated economies. Pyongyang became part of a broader network of states that Moscow aligned to surpass Western pressure. This shift represents a deeper transformation of Russia's external direction. States that are under international sanctions, that are more independent of western economies, or that openly challenge the Western-led international order have become more attractive partners. North Korea's long standing isolation, centralized political system and its rivalry with the United States make it a very compatible partner for Moscow (Rinna, 2023, n. 631).

Moscow and Pyongyang relations have moved from a symbolic alignment towards a concrete strategic partnership. In terms of military cooperation, North Korea has become a major contributor to Russia's war in Ukraine. Reports indicate that Pyongyang has supplied large quantities of ammunition, artillery shells and ballistic missiles. In return, Pyongyang has benefited from economic and technological assistance. Moscow has provided fuel, food supplies and guidance in missile and satellite systems (Davenport,

2024, p. 22-23). This exchange demonstrates that the partnerships are driven by strategic needs, rather than ideology.

At the political level, the relationship also grew. In 2024, President Vladimir Putin visited North Korea that resulted in a new bilateral treaty that gives a higher level of strategic cooperation. The agreement echoed Cold War-era security arrangements but adapted to contemporary geopolitical conditions providing mutual assistance in the event of armed conflict (Nadjibulla and Williams, 2024, para1). Even though these commitments remain ambiguous, the message it's clear: Moscow is willing to formalise the alliance with Pyongyang.

The partnership has not only been noticeable in bilateral agreements or military cooperation, it has also shifted Russia's approach to international norms and institutions. In the past, Moscow had maintained its obligations under the United Nations framework, in particular voting in favor of resolutions banning Pyongyang's nuclear and missile programs -one in 2003 and another in 2017 (Arasli, Gorenburg, Lewis, 2024, para 6)- . However, Moscow has become more permissive towards North Korean sanctions violations. In 2024, Russia used its veto of the renewal of the UN Panel of Experts that was monitoring sanctions on North Korea; it represents a weakening in the international enforcement mechanism (The United Nations, 2024, para 6).

By deepening cooperation with Pyongyang, Moscow pushes for the emergence of a more polarised international system, where geopolitical tensions in one specific region can involve others. Moreover, the partnership allows Russia to retain influence beyond Ukraine and western regions, creating tensions and pressure points in Northeast Asia and linking regional security dynamics to a broader global rivalry (Kyoung Chang, 2026, para 2). Lastly, the new partnership with North Korea demonstrates a transformation in Russia's external influence. In contrast to its declining influence over South Korea, Russia has started to reallocate its influence with partners that are more politically aligned, that provide better leverage on geopolitical objectives and their ideology is less influenced by western ideology.

Figure 1. ***Timeline Russia and The Korean Peninsula influence.***

Beyond the Korean Peninsula: Russia's Wider Eurasian Realignment

The shift of partnership in the Korean peninsula has demonstrated a change of partners alignment from Russia, this shift has not only been seen in Northeast Asia. Russia's deepening relationship with North Korea reflects a similar dynamic with other partners, in particular Belarus and Iran. These partnerships are not based on formal alliances in the traditional aspect, they are shaped by bilateral agreement on strategic interest and mutual isolation ((Arasli, Gorenburg, Lewis, 2024, para 8).

As mentioned before, the key feature of these new emerging partnerships is the mutual feeling of anti western orientation. The different states help themselves as a way to mitigate external pressure and position themselves as an opposition of the US led international order, they support each other by military cooperation, sanctions evasion or diplomatic support. For instance, in the case with Iran, collaboration with Moscow has been focused primarily on the military domain; transforming and joining production of drone technologies (Azizi, 2025, para. 8). On the other hand, Belarus has provided a crucial political and strategic partner for Russia in the European atmosphere.

Besides the anti Western and anti US position, these countries also aligned in their centralised authority political model, having a strong security equipment and the use of external tension to sustain internal stability. Moreover, their international position has become more militarized and confrontational, relying on standard capabilities and also on tools such as economic coercion, disinformation and selective view of international norms (Arasli, Gorenburg, Lewis, 2024, para 9).

Figure 1 *Global threat: Russia and its autocratic allies,* Ukraïner (2024).

With these patterns, Russia can play a central coordinating role while it creates an alternative from European alignments. Russia and Iran's military production cooperation, its growing partnership with North Korea and the political alignment with Belarus demonstrate how Moscow is spreading its influence across different regions and states that we have been seeing in the past decades. Even though these relationships are not equal and often based on short term interests, these new alliances reflect an increasing level of coordination between these countries and a will to challenge the western international order. Hence, the shift from Seoul to Pyongyang should not be understood as an isolated case, it is a key component of a wider Eurasian realignment. The Korean Peninsula represents one regional case of a broader shift where Moscow is redefining its influence.

Conclusion

Russia's changing relationships on the Korean Peninsula demonstrates a wider transformation in its foreign policy since the invasion of Ukraine. After the Cold War, Moscow prioritised economic and diplomatic partnerships with South Korea, however, after 2022, Russia moved towards partners that are more politically aligned and disconnected from the Western led system. Therefore, the strengthening of Moscow and Pyongyang relations reflect more than a regional adjustment; it represents a strategic reorientation.

The new alignment demonstrates that Russia is not necessarily losing influence internationally, it is redistributing towards states that are ideologically more aligned. In the case of North Korea, the alignment has become

more than a diplomatic partner, but also a military and geopolitical actor supporting Russia's objectives beyond Northeast Asia.

The Korean Peninsula is not the only region that experienced a shift with Moscow, states such as Iran and Belarus have become closer allies. These alignments are based on ideological solidarity and mutual resistance to Western pressure, the desire of challenging the existing international order and security cooperation. As a result, the Korean peninsula has become a part of a wider Eurasins realignment for Russia, where regional conflicts and partnerships are increasingly interconnected.

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