The Revitalisation of Sino-North Korean Relations:

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Diplomatic engagement against Russian influence?

The year 2022 marked a turning point in Russia's and North Korea's diplomacy. Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine and growing diplomatic isolation from the West (Tsygankov, 2022, pp. 197–198), Moscow sought alternative diplomatic and military support (Howell, 2024, pp. 5-10). These developments created opportunities for closer cooperation between Russia and North Korea.

Meanwhile, Sino-North Korean relations also began to recover. Bilateral trade increased in 2022 following the COVID-19 pandemic (United Nations Statistics Division, 2026), while July 2023 marked the first high-level diplomatic meeting between China and North Korea since 2019 (新华社 [Xinhua

News Agency], 2023). Although these developments could reflect post-pandemic normalisation, they also coincided with growing Russian influence in Pyongyang, raising questions about China's strategic motivations.

To what extent is China's renewed engagement with North Korea an attempt to counter growing Russian influence? This paper argues that Beijing's rapprochement may reflect concerns that Russian economic and military support could reduce North Korea's dependence on China and threaten regional stability. However, post-pandemic normalisation and shared Sino-Russian interests offer alternative explanations. By examining China's security interests alongside recent diplomatic and economic developments, this paper assesses whether Beijing's renewed engagement constitutes a strategic effort to preserve its influence over Pyongyang.

China's security concerns on Russian influence in North Korea

China's interest in the Korean Peninsula

Despite ideological similarities and their shared history during the Korean War, Sino-North Korean relations became less predictable as China's diplomatic priorities shifted away from Cold War bipolarity under Deng Xiaoping. In the 1980s, China and South Korea began developing diplomatic ties, which brought deep friction to Sino-North Korean relations. The friction intensified in the mid-2000s with North Korea testing its first nuclear weapon (Fong, 2024). North Korea's provocations towards South Korea threaten China's regional security. Given the Korean Peninsula's proximity to China's northeastern provinces, which host its economic and political centres, China needs regional stability while avoiding North Korea's destabilisation (Sutter, 2012). Preserving the status quo would maintain North Korea as a buffer between China and South Korea and keep it within Beijing's sphere of influence (Fong, 2024). Therefore, the most secure option for China on the Korean Peninsula is to keep the status quo alive with North Korea inside its realm of influence.

The Danger of Russo-North Korean Cooperation for Chinese Security

Russia's war in Ukraine and North Korea's confrontational foreign policy led the two internationally isolated, sanctioned states to closer cooperation. Therefore, since 2023, North Korea has supported Russia through arms exports, recognition of its annexations, and troop deployments to Ukraine (SIPRI, 2026; Wishnik, 2025).

Meanwhile, Russia is repaying North Korea's support with economic aid and technology transfers (Lin et al., 2025). This is a dangerous situation for China's security strategy. China accounts for over 90% of its foreign trade (Power, 2026). This support sustains North Korea's economy and nuclear programme, giving Beijing considerable leverage over Pyongyang's policies

(Nanto, 2009). Losing this leverage could potentially reduce Pyongyang's dependence on Beijing (Lin et al., 2025).

Russia is also expected to continue exporting technology and machinery to North Korea (Lin et al., 2025), potentially modernising its military and encouraging further provocations by reducing Pyongyang's perceived risks of a South Korean response.

Additionally, the 2024 Russia–DPRK Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Agreement provides for mutual military assistance in the event of war (Cha & Kim, 2024). The treaty legitimised North Korean troop deployments to Ukraine and provides security guarantees for Pyongyang. Its ambiguous provisions may also permit military support beyond purely defensive scenarios.

Russia's partnership with North Korea supports its war in Ukraine while providing Pyongyang with economic aid, technology transfers, and security guarantees. Russia could therefore become an alternative to China, which holds onto the status quo in Korea, reducing Beijing's leverage and complicating its efforts to maintain regional stability. Countering Russian influence would consequently serve China's security interests.

Chinese engagement in North Korea

The diplomatic sphere of influence: revitalisation of diplomatic relations

In July 2023, Li Hongzhong met Kim Jong Un to mark the 70th anniversary of the Korean War armistice (新华社 [Xinhua News Agency], 2023). The meeting marked the first high-level Sino-North Korean exchange since 2019, following years of strained relations caused by North Korea's nuclear tests and subsequent Chinese sanctions in the mid-2010s (Fong, 2024). The 2023 anniversary initiated further symbolic gestures, including the DPRK's 75th founding anniversary in September 2023 and the 75th anniversary of Sino-North Korean diplomatic relations and China-DPRK Friendship Year in 2024 (中华人民外交部 [MfA of the PRC], 2026). The symbolism peaked in 2025, when Xi Jinping and Kim Jong Un met in Beijing, following the commemoration of the 80th anniversary of the end of World War II in Asia, prompting speculation about a normalisation of ties (Tagesschau, 2025).

Following these symbolic efforts, signs of diplomatic progress began to emerge. In April 2026, during a meeting in Pyongyang with Kim Jong Un, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi emphasised that more frequent High-Level exchanges are essential to stability on the Korean Peninsula (今日头条 [Toutiao], 2026). Further engagement included a June Xi–Kim summit and July visits by Pak Thae Song and Wang Huning, reaffirming commitments to economic cooperation and the bilateral friendship treaty (Town et al., 2026; Lee, 2026; MiDeer Observer, 2026). China's Cold War-era mutual

defence treaty with North Korea remains its only binding defence pact and may serve as a counterweight to the 2024 Russia–DPRK treaty.

China has invested considerable symbolic effort in restoring diplomatic ties through frequent high-level meetings. The resumption of summit diplomacy in 2026 suggests gradual progress, although these efforts have revitalised rather than fundamentally transformed the relationship. As John Delury of the Asia Society points out, it remains unclear whether Chinese efforts can match the wartime propaganda surrounding Russo-North Korean relations. (The Guardian, 2026)

The economic sphere: The comeback of Chinese Trading Influence

Another way to assess Chinese efforts to uphold its influence in North Korea is through its trade relations. China's dominant position in the trilateral relationship leaves North Korea economically dependent on Beijing (Asia Pacific Task Force, 2025). Reduced dependence would weaken China's influence over Pyongyang's foreign policy and development capabilities. However, Russian economic aid and technology transfers could weaken this dependence, allowing North Korea greater autonomy from Beijing.

First of all, analysing North Korean trade is difficult because it does not publish official statistics. GACC data available through UN Comtrade can be used, covering bilateral trade until December 2024. Later figures rely on media reports based on Chinese press conferences. These figures capture officially recorded goods trade but exclude services, while still indicating changes in bilateral trade.

Bilateral trade recovered from July 2022, rising by 132.9% in 2023 and 25.67% in 2025 despite a slowdown in 2024 (United Nations Statistics Division, 2026; Sokolin, 2026). This indicates that greater interest in ties with North Korea led to a rapid increase in bilateral trade. However, comparing GACC statistics from 2016 and 2019 with those from 2025 shows that trade remained below pre-pandemic levels, largely due to a decline in North Korean exports to China (United Nations Statistics Division, 2026).

North Korean exports accounted for 13.86% of bilateral trade in 2022, down from around 50% before 2017, and reached only about 20% in preliminary 2026 figures despite continued growth (United Nations Statistics Division, 2026; Howe, 2026; News1, 2026; Sokolin, 2026b). North Korea's limited economic capacity, pandemic-related shutdowns, and sanctions may explain its persistently low exports. This would also explain China's new investments in North Korean production facilities (Hwa, 2026). These investments could strengthen Beijing's economic influence while presenting China as a reliable development partner.

China has sought to revitalise economic ties through increased bilateral trade and by increasing the share of North Korean imports and investment in North Korean production facilities. Although trade has recovered slowly,

these investments could strengthen Chinese influence and position Beijing as a development partner. However, how deep those relations will actually go will depend on multiple factors, such as North Korea's export capacity and China's willingness to invest.

Conclusion

This brief examined the extent to which China's engagement with North Korea can be seen as a counterbalance to Russian influence. Russia's economic and technological support could weaken North Korea's dependence on China, threatening a key element of Beijing's security strategy. China has used diplomatic and economic leverage, including sanctions in the 2010s, to influence North Korean policies. North Korea could now develop an alternative strategic partnership with Russia, diversifying its sources of international income and increasing its development capabilities without China's help. To preserve its influence over the Korean security balance, China has revitalised summit diplomacy, increased bilateral trade, and invested in North Korean production capabilities to counterbalance Russia's growing engagement. However, it is struggling to keep pace, as, for instance, bilateral trade has only just reached its 2019 level, with North Korean imports still accounting for a small share of China's total imports. China's diplomatic efforts have also so far remained largely symbolic and focused on revitalising relations. Therefore, it remains to be seen whether China will continue investing in its ties with North Korea and whether those efforts will lead to any breakthroughs in the near future.

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