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WORLDASIA

# Ukraine War Gives North Korea Reasons to Draw Closer to Russia

Pyongyang plans to send laborers to eastern Ukraine, opening up a new pipeline for much needed revenue for the Kim regime



By *Dasl Yoon* [Follow](#)

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SEOUL—Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has created an opportunity for North Korea, which has strengthened its ties with Moscow and become one of its most outspoken backers.

Pyongyang wants to dispatch laborers to the Russia-controlled regions of eastern Ukraine —Donetsk and Luhansk—providing the Kim regime with a much-needed source of overseas income. Russian President Vladimir Putin has promised to provide allies with advanced weapons and military equipment, just as North Korea is pursuing new assets like hypersonic missiles. Moscow can also boost its cross-border trade of food and aid and use its seat on the United Nations Security Council to block any tighter sanctions on North Korea.

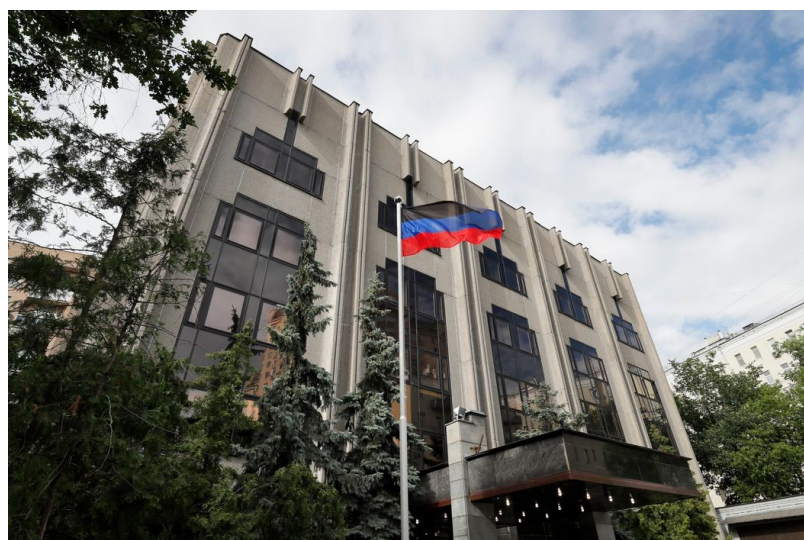
North Korea was one of just five countries in March to vote against a U.N. resolution demanding that Russia end its invasion of Ukraine, with Pyongyang blaming the

“hegemonic policy” of the U.S. and its allies as the root cause. In July, North Korea became one of the first countries to officially recognize Donetsk and Luhansk as independent republics, a move that prompted Kyiv to cut diplomatic ties with Pyongyang.

“For North Korea, supporting Putin opens the door to more significant sanctions evasions and sensitive technology cooperation,” said Patrick Cronin, the Asia-Pacific security chair at the Hudson Institute, a think tank in Washington.

The U.N. banned North Korean laborers from working abroad past a 2019 deadline, cutting off a key source of overseas income for the Kim regime. With roughly 30,000 foreign workers from North Korea, Russia was one of the largest hosts of such people before the clampdown. North Korean workers were appealing because their wages were advertised by Russian companies as being 30% to 50% lower than other migrants in the region, who typically came from Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan.

Russia is likely to maintain that Donetsk and Luhansk are independent regions not subject to international sanctions violations as nonmembers of the U.N. North Korea’s ambassador to Russia, in a meeting earlier this month with an envoy from Donetsk, revealed plans to send laborers to the region once the Kim regime’s Covid-19 border restrictions were lifted.



North Korean workers could help restore facilities in Donetsk that were damaged by fighting in the Ukraine conflict, said Alexander Matsegora, Russia’s Ambassador to North Korea, in an interview last month with the Russian newspaper Izvestia.

North Koreans are also interested in purchasing spare parts manufactured in the region and reconstructing their production facilities, Mr. Matsegora said, without being more

specific. The potential transactions foreshadow other efforts that could constitute U.N. sanctions violations.

“Pyongyang has nothing to lose by siding with Moscow, and it has nothing to lose by angering Washington as talks are stalled anyway,” said Artyom Lukin, an international relations professor at Russia’s Far Eastern Federal University.

The Biden administration has offered to meet with North Korea at any time, though Pyongyang has given Washington the cold shoulder. The two countries haven’t held formal nuclear talks in nearly three years.



The tightening Moscow-Pyongyang alliance extends to the highest levels. Earlier this month, the leaders of Russia and North Korea exchanged letters, according to state media in Pyongyang. Mr. Putin expressed a desire to expand relations, while Kim Jong Un noted that bilateral ties had hit a new high “in the common front for frustrating the hostile forces’ military threat and provocation”—an often-used descriptor for the U.S. and its allies.

The Kim regime became one of the first countries to seal off its borders in early 2020 as Covid-19 was detected in neighboring China. Early this year, North Korea resumed some cross-border trade activity, before an outbreak prompted the impoverished country to lock down again.

But this month, Mr. Kim declared a public-health victory and promised to relax measures from maximum levels. Once cross-border trade resumes, Russia could illicitly provide North Korea with coal or export prohibited luxury goods, said Anthony Rinna, a specialist

on Russia-North Korea relations at the Sino-NK research group, a website focused on China and North Korea.



“If North Korea can present itself as a strategic asset for Moscow in its strategic rivalry with Washington, in a manner not unlike how China has increasingly come to view them, North Korea can potentially help undermine U.S. influence on Russia’s periphery,” Mr. Rinna said.

Mr. Putin met Mr. Kim once in person in 2019, just a few months after the North Korean leader failed to broker a nuclear deal with former U.S. President Donald Trump in Vietnam. Though he didn’t mention North Korea by name, Mr. Putin, at a recent security conference, vowed to “consistently strengthen the national armed forces and other security structures” by providing its allies with advanced weapons and military equipment.

The Soviets helped build a reactor at Yongbyon, which has become North Korea’s main nuclear facility. In the 1990s, Russian scientists supplied North Korea with fuel technologies, which helped Pyongyang’s missile development program. The liquid-propellant engine used during launches of intermediate and intercontinental range missiles is based on technology developed by the Soviet Union, according to a 2017 report by the International Institute for Strategic Studies, a London-based think tank.





More recently, a new tactical guided weapon that North Korea revealed in 2019 closely resembled a Russian design. As North Korea pursues new weapons technology and seeks to advance its hypersonic and submarine-launched missiles, Russia could illicitly provide key components or advanced engine technology, security experts say.

“Pyongyang and Moscow see clear parallels in their respective situations and share a common cause in opposing sanctions and the U.S.-led ‘Western Order,’” said Patricia M. Kim, a fellow at the Washington, D.C.-based Brookings Institution. “The growing solidarity will exacerbate great power competition in the region.”

**Write to Dasl Yoon at [dasl.yoon@wsj.com](mailto:dasl.yoon@wsj.com)**