

North Korea

North Korea seizes on Russian isolation to deepen ties with Putin

Kim Jong Un cultivates relationship in effort to win support for his own strategic goals



Kim Jong Un, left, and Vladimir Putin have found a shared interest in their antipathy to the US © Alexander Zemlianichenko/AP

Christian Davies in Seoul YESTERDAY

Stay across the latest Ukraine coverage. [Join the FT's Telegram channel](#)

×

North Korea has seized upon Russia's international isolation following President Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine to foster closer ties, threatening international efforts to pressure Pyongyang over its illicit nuclear weapons programme.

US officials said on Tuesday that Russia has purchased “[millions of rockets and artillery shells](#)” from North Korea as western sanctions begin to choke Moscow's supply of weapons.

The disclosure is the latest sign of warming ties between the countries, after Pyongyang broke with Chinese policy in July and recognised the breakaway territories of Luhansk and Donetsk in Russian-occupied Ukraine.

That was followed last month by an exchange of letters between [North Korean](#) leader Kim Jong Un and Putin promising to “expand comprehensive and constructive bilateral relations with common efforts”.

Analysts and western diplomats said Pyongyang was offering Moscow its support to secure reciprocal backing in the event of heightened tensions on the Korean peninsula.

“Pyongyang sees in Russia’s increasing isolation from the west an opportunity to get Moscow deeper into its corner,” said Anthony Rinna, a specialist in North Korea-Russia relations at the Sino-NK research group. “If Kim doesn’t take Russia’s side explicitly now, there is no telling when he may have the chance to do so in future.”



Kim Jong Un's regime has sold rockets and other military equipment to Russia as Moscow's supplies have been squeezed by western sanctions © KCNA/KNS/dpa

North Korea was quick to express its support for the Russian [invasion of Ukraine](#) in February, blaming the war on US “hegemonic policy” and “high-handedness”. The Kim regime was one of just four countries — other than Russia — to oppose a UN general assembly resolution condemning the military action.

Moscow has repaid the favour by echoing Pyongyang’s denunciation of large-scale [military exercises](#) conducted by the US and South Korea in August.

In a recent interview with Russian media, Moscow’s ambassador to North Korea even appeared to endorse Pyongyang’s unsubstantiated claims that [balloons infected with Covid-19](#) and flown into the country from South Korea were responsible for a coronavirus outbreak this year.

Representatives of the breakaway “people’s republics” of Luhansk and Donetsk have discussed proposals with North Korean officials for Pyongyang to send workers to help rebuild cities in Russia-occupied Ukraine.

Aaron Arnold, a counterproliferation expert at the Royal United Services Institute

think-tank who has served on a UN panel monitoring North Korean sanctions violations, said the acquisition of artillery or use of labour constituted “serious violations” of sanctions. But he added that Russia had never been fully committed to enforcing the measures.

“Russia has been in violation of sanctions on North Korea for years,” said Arnold. “These are egregious violations that have been documented and widely publicised.”

Analysts said Russia’s economic isolation could result in closer co-ordination between criminal networks associated with the two countries.

“Smuggling is an increasingly important part of the Russian economy. This is the bread and butter of how North Korea operates, so it easy to see how alliances will be forged — especially in the Russian far east where officials operate on a very long leash,” said Alexander Gabuev, a senior fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace think-tank, citing potential trade in arms, narcotics and cryptocurrencies.

While acknowledging that relations between the UN Security Council’s permanent members were “broken”, a senior western diplomat expressed hope that “some degree of unity” would return in the event of a North Korean nuclear test.

“The key will be whether Russia feels sufficiently alienated from what it calls the ‘collective west’ to start truly engaging in nefarious behaviour,” said Rinna. “If Russia reaches what it views as a point of no return, the sky’s the limit as to how North Korea and Russia could co-operate.”

Yun Sun, director of the China programme at the Stimson Center think-tank in Washington, noted that a closer partnership between North Korea and Russia could also prove awkward for Beijing, which has not recognised the separatist republics in eastern Ukraine.

“China is concerned about confrontation on the Korean peninsula between a ‘Northern Triangle’ of North Korea, Russia and China and a ‘Southern Triangle’ of South Korea, Japan and the US,” she said.

“It is unthinkable that Russian and China would veto a UN Security Council resolution after a North Korean nuclear test,” Sun added.

“North Korea wants the return of the Northern Triangle because it wants Russia and China to offer solid support without hesitation. But China doesn’t want this because all it does is push South Korea and Japan deeper into the American camp.”

+

+

+

+

[Copyright](#) The Financial Times Limited 2022. All rights reserved.
