

# ‘Axis of impunity’: Putin-Kim deal underlines new challenges to world order

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Online Desk :

Shortly after signing a new comprehensive strategic partnership between their two countries, Russian President Vladimir Putin and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un showed off their closer ties by going for a spin in a Russian-made Aurus limousine.

In a carefully choreographed public relations exercise, it was Putin who took the wheel first while Kim sat on the passenger side, grinning broadly. After Putin brought the car to a stop, a white-gloved aide opened the vehicle’s doors to allow the two men to swap seats.

Robert Dover, professor of intelligence and national security at the University of Hull in the United Kingdom, told Al Jazeera that photographs from the visit appeared to show “a genuine empathy” between Kim and Putin.

The two countries’ latest pact, which includes a mutual defence agreement, is a sign of just how far the relationship has come since Putin embarked on his full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

Where once Moscow, a veto-holding member of the United Nations Security Council, worked with the international community to rein in Pyongyang’s missile and nuclear weapons programmes, it now appears to be giving its explicit support to the world’s most-isolated regime.

The agreement “should not come as a surprise,” wrote Eugene Rumer, a senior fellow at the Carnegie Endowment and the director of its Russia and Eurasia programme, in a commentary after North Korea released additional details of the agreement.

“The embrace of the North Korean dictator is the logical extension of Putin’s course after he launched his all-out invasion of Ukraine. He staked his entire tenure on victory. When triumph proved elusive, he went all in, hell-bent on winning even if it meant destroying his country; severing the critical diplomatic, security, and trade ties with the West; and weaponizing everything at his disposal.”

The latest deal replaces the Friendship, Cooperation and Good Neighbourliness Treaty that the two countries signed in 2000, just after Putin became president for the first time and North Korea was under the rule of Kim Jong Il, the father of Kim Jong Un.

But its contents more closely echo the Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance that was signed in 1961 when Russia was the dominant power in the now-defunct Soviet Union.

As well as the mutual defence deal, which has attracted the most attention, it also includes provisions for cooperation in healthcare, medical education and science, as well as plans for a road bridge across the Tumen River. North Korean state media released what it said was the full version of the text. Kim was effusive, describing the deal as an “alliance” and declaring Russia his country’s “most honest friend and ally”.

Putin, who was feted by smiling children on Kim Il Sung Square, and driven through streets adorned with giant portraits of his own face as well as Russian flags, appeared slightly more restrained.

The deal was a “breakthrough document”, Putin said, and reflected the two countries’ desire to lift their “relations to a new qualitative level”.

## ‘Axis of impunity’

The United States and South Korea have accused North Korea of sending weapons to Russia for use in its war in Ukraine, where its soldiers are locked in brutal battles with Ukrainian forces along a more than 1,000km-long (600 mile) front line.

The same week that Putin and Kim met, the US State Department said North Korea had “unlawfully transferred dozens of ballistic missiles and over 11,000 containers of munitions to aid Russia’s war effort” in recent months.

UN sanctions inspectors, in their final report before a Russian veto ended their mandate, said fragments of North Korean ballistic missiles had been found in Kharkiv, Ukraine’s second biggest city and currently the target of renewed Russian assaults.

Moscow is thought to be providing technological expertise in return for such assistance. Just two months after Kim and Putin met at Russia’s Vostochny Cosmodrome last September, North Korea successfully placed its first spy satellite into orbit. An earlier attempt, just three weeks before the trip, was a failure.

Some analysts have warned the agreement is another sign of a strengthening alignment between countries opposed to the US and the “rules-based international order”, which has provided the framework for international affairs since the end of World War II.

Going into his visit to Pyongyang, Putin spoke of Russia and North Korea standing up to supposed “US pressure, blackmail and military threats” and “accelerating the building of a new multi-polar world”.

Describing “an emerging axis of impunity”, Leif-Eric Easley, a professor at Ewha University in Seoul, said that while power was “everything” to authoritarian states, their relations were likely to be less stable than those between the US and its allies in the Asia Pacific and elsewhere.

“Pyongyang and Moscow lack the shared institutions, rule of law, and functional interdependence that make US alliances with Japan, South Korea, and NATO countries credible and durable,” Easley said in emailed comments.

Others point to a more transactional relationship between the two countries.

“History tells us that North Korea-Russia ties are mainly driven by interests,” said Ramon Pacheco Pardo, a professor in international relations at King’s College London. He noted that economic and security ties fell apart after the collapse of the Soviet Union and that Putin himself abandoned Pyongyang to back UN sanctions in 2006. He did not meet Kim, who became North Korean leader after his father’s death in 2011, until eight years later.

“Were Russia’s invasion of Ukraine to end for any reason, it would not be surprising if it distanced itself from North Korea and sought stronger relations with other countries – including South Korea,” Pacheco Pardo wrote in an analysis of the trip.

## The China question

And then there is China, long North Korea’s biggest ally and economic benefactor, and a country that has also been deepening its ties with Russia.

It was China where Putin decided to make his first overseas trip after securing a sixth term as president.

Beijing afforded Putin a red carpet welcome outside the Great Hall of the People and he later drank tea with Chinese President Xi Jinping on a terrace in the Zhongnanhai leaders’ compound. Bilateral trade between the

two countries hit a record high of \$240bn in 2023, and China, which says it is neutral in the Ukraine war but has not condemned Moscow for its full-scale invasion, is now Russia's number one trade partner.

In contrast with the condemnation from Washington, Tokyo and Seoul, Beijing's response has been more muted.

When asked about Putin's visit to Pyongyang, China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesman Lin Jian noted the "bilateral" nature of the agreement.

"The cooperation between Russia and the DPRK is a matter between two sovereign states," Lin said on Friday referring to North Korea by its official name, and declining further comment.

Analysts say the stress on the bilateral nature of the relationships – whether between Russia and North Korea, North Korea and China or China and Russia – is key, given that Beijing is also trying to stabilise ties with Washington and develop warmer relations in Europe as well as with its regional neighbours.

Indeed, last month, Beijing resumed high-level talks with South Korea and Japan for the first time in more than four years.

"China wishes to keep its options open rather than being bogged down by Russia and the DPRK in a bipolar arrangement in Northeast Asia and the broader regional, or even global power equilibrium," said Yun Sun, the director of the China programme at the Council of Foreign Relations.

Given China shares Russia's vision of a remodelled international order, however, there are complex issues at play.

"There is clearly an anti-Western bloc forming and what we need to be looking at carefully is the activism of China and Russia across the whole of Africa, but particularly sea-facing countries, in Latin America and the Middle East," Dover said.

Russia has already shown its willingness to hamper the responses of institutions, such as the UN Security Council, that have been the core institutions of global governance for nearly 80 years.

The drive in the Aurus was not only a sign of the two leaders' closeness but an indication that the Russia of 2024 is more than willing to thwart the very UN sanctions it once helped frame.