

# The Russia–North Korea Alignment

## — A Buck Passing?

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Russia is strongly incentivized to buck pass the burden of countering American power to China, and this may be why Russia has supported North Korea's military technologies. An increase in North Korea's capabilities results in a greater likelihood of crises that may trigger American involvement. China cannot overlook American military engagement because it is competing with the United States across East Asia. Thus, a US–China crisis in the Korean Peninsula could reduce American military pressure in Europe, potentially functioning as a buck-passing strategy toward China.

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## Stalin's Buck-passing Strategy During the Korean War

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The Soviet Union likely successfully employed a buck-passing strategy during the Korean War. China decided to intervene in the Korean War on October 13, 1950—only one day after Stalin advised the North Korean leader Kim Il sung to flee the country. Even though China resisted sole intervention in the war, Stalin clearly demonstrated that the Soviet Union would never fight against the United States in the peninsula, even when North Korea was on the verge of collapse.<sup>1</sup> This compelled China to fight the United States alone.

In this manner, Stalin imposed the responsibility of confronting the US military on China. Originally, China had characterized the Korean War as a "civil war" in which it should not directly involve itself.<sup>2</sup> The shift from this position to active participation likely arose due to the bipolar structure between the United States and China, which Stalin deliberately helped create. At the beginning of the war, the Korean Peninsula constituted a multipolar theater, with North Korea situated between the US forces and China while the Soviet Union remained a potential participant. This situation allowed China to buck pass the burden of countering American threats to North Korea. Even if the war signaled a potential invasion route through the Korean Peninsula, one of the three avenues (along with Taiwan and Vietnam) that Mao believed the Americans could use to attack China, North Korea could prevent such a venture without China having to involve itself directly. However, North Korea was on the verge of collapse and the Soviet Union had declined to impede the advance of American troops. Thus, only China could confront the United States on the Korean Peninsula, leading to a bipolar situation in which China had little choice but to enter the war, in line with Stalin's expectations.<sup>3</sup>

Stalin anticipated that the Korean War would divert American power away from Europe and pull China into the struggle, ultimately exhausting the United States.<sup>4</sup> Thus, he appeared to adopt a strategy that passed the responsibility of confronting the US military to China, seeking to weaken the United States at China's expense.

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## **Bipolar Structure Renders China a Competitor in the Korean Peninsula**

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The bipolar structure that likely put the United States and China into competition in the Korean Peninsula has re-emerged across East Asia. Although North Korea shows no sign of collapse, China has emerged as a great power. In the absence of a third great power between the United States and China, any regional issue becomes a matter of competition between them.<sup>5</sup> Thus, Russia's support of North Korea's military technologies would lead to North Korea acquiring more capabilities, thereby escalating crises that force the United States and China to involve themselves. When the Korean crisis leads the United States to shift its focus from Europe or the Middle East to East Asia, this represents Russia's buck passing of US pressure onto China.

Indeed, following its rise as a great power, China has become increasingly aware of its strategic competition with the United States. This awareness is evident in China's calls for a "peace regime" to formally replace the Korean War armistice. It has been argued that China views the peace treaty as a mechanism to challenge the legitimacy of US military stationing in Korea. This perception became apparent nearly two decades ago. On May 27, 2008, a spokesperson for China's Foreign Ministry characterized the US–Republic of Korea (ROK) alliance as a "leftover from history" that should be replaced by a regional security mechanism.<sup>6</sup> While China has generally viewed "alliances" as relics of the Cold War, it had never previously applied that label specifically to the US–ROK alliance. Furthermore, the open opposition to the presence of US forces on the Korean Peninsula marked a notable shift in China's stance; China had avoided doing so after the US–China rapprochement during the 1970s.

This shift is also reflected in China's proposed "dual-track approach," which calls for parallel progress on two fronts: achieving denuclearization and replacing the armistice with a peace regime.<sup>7</sup> Even though North Korea's growing threat placed denuclearization at the top of the agenda, China has called for simultaneously advancing a peace regime since 2016.<sup>8</sup> This occurred a few days after the United States and the ROK began discussing the possible deployment of Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) for United States Forces Korea.<sup>9</sup> The timing of this declaration raises strong doubts about whether China promoted the peace regime agenda to oppose the reinforcement of US military presence in the ROK. Eventually, China's Vice Foreign Minister reiterated Beijing's call for a peace regime, arguing that the THAAD deployment in South Korea demonstrated why US-led alliances in the Asia Pacific represented a leftover from history.<sup>10</sup>

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## The Logic Behind Supporting North Korea's Escalation Capabilities

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China has come to view US military presence in the Korean Peninsula as a competing source of power. If North Korea escalates a crisis in a way that triggers additional deployments from the United States, China is likely to interpret those reinforcements as growing threats to its own security. Therefore, Russia's support for North Korea's escalatory military capabilities raises the probability of confrontations between the United States and China, constituting a form of buck passing that shifts the United States' strategic attention from Europe to China.

Previously, Russia did not support North Korea's confrontational posture toward the US–ROK alliance, given Moscow's own strategic interests. For example, North Korea's failure to acquire Su-35 fighter jets from Russia was reportedly due to their high cost.<sup>11</sup> If the provision of such advanced aircraft depended primarily on North Korea's ability to pay, Pyongyang's military capabilities vis-à-vis the US–ROK forces were not a significant factor in Russia's strategic calculations.<sup>12</sup> However, Russia's stance changed after suffering heavy losses in its invasion of Ukraine. In September 2023, President Putin offered Kim Jong-un an opportunity to observe a test flight of a Su-35 fighter jet at an aviation plant in the Russian Far East.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, the fact that the two leaders held their summit at the Vostochny Spaceport strongly suggested that Russia intended to assist North Korea in developing its reconnaissance satellite network, which would enhance the credibility of North Korea's threat to conduct a preemptive nuclear strike.

Why did Russia shift from prioritizing non-proliferation to providing North Korea with escalatory capabilities? The buck-passing strategy—using North Korea to divert American attention from Europe to the Far East—offers a compelling explanation. Even if North Korea were to trigger a crisis that it could no longer control, Russia has little reason to fear entrapment because China is likely to confront the United States under the present-day bipolar great-power competition.

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## Russia Will Continue Support but Not Send Troops to North Korea

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If Russia adopts a buck-passing strategy, it should limit its obligations under a mutual defense (or partnership) treaty.<sup>14</sup> In situations where North Korea may engage in conflict with US–ROK forces, Russia must avoid making any commitment to send its own troops. For the buck-passing strategy to work, Russia needs North Korea or China, and not Russia itself, to confront the United States on the Korean Peninsula. Accordingly, the treaty is unlikely to bring Russian troops directly to the peninsula.

North Korea also appears to recognize that conflicts initiated by either party through attacks on a third party's territory do not fall within the scope of mutual defense. When the Central Military Commission of the Workers' Party of Korea announced the deployment of North Korean troops to Kursk, Russia, it stated that these military activities "within the territory of the Russian Federation fully conform to all the provisions and the spirit of the UN Charter and other international laws and the treaty on comprehensive strategic

partnership between the DPRK and Russia.” Although the statement also referred to “special military operations,” it did not justify those operations with reference to the UN Charter, thereby distinguishing them from North Korea’s activities in Kursk.<sup>15</sup>

This position differs from that of President Putin, who has justified the “special military operations” that invaded Ukrainian territory by invoking Article 51 of the UN Charter, which provides for individual or collective self-defense.<sup>16</sup> While North Korea has expressed strong political support for Russia since the invasion, it has never invoked international law—such as the UN Charter—to justify this position.<sup>17</sup> When North Korea signed the mutual defense treaty with Russia, it expressed direct support for the “special military operation” for the first time but yet again avoided invoking international law to justify that position (June 2024).<sup>18</sup>

Article 4 of the Russia–North Korea partnership treaty states that when either party is “put in a state of war by an armed invasion,” the other is required to provide military assistance. North Korea has argued that its deployment to the Kursk area—an action that does not clearly contradict this condition—is consistent with the UN Charter. Article 51 of the UN Charter also serves as a basis for Article 4 of the partnership treaty. If North Korea were to justify the invasion of Ukraine by invoking the UN Charter, it could be obligated to deploy troops to support any future Russian invasion. Avoiding such entrapment is therefore in North Korea’s interest.

Besides, North Korea’s participation in the “special military operation” is not ideal for Russia either, as it could create reciprocal obligations for Moscow to join North Korea’s conflict with US–ROK forces—contradicting Russia’s buck-passing strategy. For this reason, Russia and North Korea are incentivized to limit the scope of their mutual defense commitments.

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## Conclusion

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Troops carrying the flags of Russia and North Korea marched at the military parade that marked the 80th founding anniversary of the Workers’ Party of Korea on October 10, 2025. Kim Jong-un praised the generals, officers, and soldiers of “the overseas military operations units who are reliably implementing the orders of the Party and the motherland.”<sup>19</sup> North Korea has not completed its deployment in support of Russia, and any areas invaded by Putin could fall under the mutual defense clause of the bilateral treaty if Pyongyang were to recognize them as Russian territory.

However, the immediate objectives pursued by the two sides under the treaty were not related to the mutual deployment of troops. The treaty was signed in June 2024, before Ukraine’s surprise attack on Kursk in August 2024. It is therefore highly unlikely that either party had contemplated a North Korean deployment to Kursk at the time of signing the treaty.

Russia and North Korea do not share adversaries on their respective fronts. Even during the Korean War, the Soviet Union, China, and North Korea—often portrayed as a unified bloc—were in fact buck-passing

US threats to one another rather than pursuing fully aligned military objectives. Today, Russia's efforts to deepen its alignment with North Korea may likewise be aimed at buck-passing US military pressure onto Pyongyang or China.

<sup>1</sup> Anatolii V. Torkunov, *Chōsen Sensō no Nazo to Shinjitsu: Kimu Irusen, Sutārin, Mōtakutō no Himitsu Denpō ni yoru* [The Mystery and Truth of the Korean War: Based on Secret Telegrams of Kim Il-sung, Stalin, and Mao Zedong], trans. Nobuo Shimotomai and Kim Song-ho (Tokyo: Sōshisha, 2001), 175–177; Nobuo Shimotomai, *Mosukuwa to Kimu Irusen: Reisen no naka no Kita Chōsen, 1945–1961* [Moscow and Kim Il-sung: North Korea in the Cold War, 1945–1961] (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 2006), 103–104.

<sup>2</sup> Shunji Hiraiwa, *Chousen Minshushugi Jinminkyowakoku to Chuukajinmin Kyowakoku* [The Democratic People's Republic of Korea and the People's Republic of China] (Tokyo: Seori Shobo, 2010), 12–13.

<sup>3</sup> The view that bipolar competition with the United States compelled China to join the Korean War effectively applies the same logic used by Kenneth Waltz to explain US intervention to the Chinese case. See Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1979), 170. This perspective aligns with the arguments in Takeshi Watanabe, "Nikyokuka Suru Chiiki ni Okeru Kankoku Kokubou: Jishu no Kikai to Sono Henyou [South Korea's National Defense in a Bipolar Region: Opportunities for Self-Reliance and their Transformation]," in *Taikoku kan Kyousou no Jidai* "no Chousen Hantou to Chitsujyo no Yukue [The Korean Peninsula and the Prospects for Regional Order in the "Era of Great Power Competition"]", ed. The Japan Institute of International Affairs (Tokyo: JIIA, 2022); Takeshi Watanabe, "Chousen Heiwa Kyoutei No Seiji: Kyoutsuu no Kyoui to Meihou no Tousei [Politics of the Korean Peace Treaty: Common Threats and Ally Control]," *Toa* (East Asia), no. 617 (2018).

<sup>4</sup> Donggil Kim and William Stueck, "Did Stalin Lure the United States into the Korean War? New Evidence on the Origins of the Korean War," *NKIDP e-Dossier* no. 1, North Korea International Documentation Project, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2008, 2–3, 5.

<sup>5</sup> This perspective draws on the logic in Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 170–171.

<sup>6</sup> Foreign Ministry of the People's Republic of China, "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Qin Gang's Regular Press Conference," May 27, 2008.

<sup>7</sup> Permanent Mission of the People's Republic of China to the United Nations. "Gēng Shuǎng dàshǐ zài Ānlìhuì Cháo hé wéntí gōngkāihuì shàng de fāyán [Remarks by Ambassador Geng Shuang at the UN Security Council Open Debate on the Nuclear Issue of the Korean Peninsula]." January 8, 2025. [https://un.china-mission.gov.cn/chn/zgylhg/jjalh/alhrd/202501/t20250109\\_11529425.htm](https://un.china-mission.gov.cn/chn/zgylhg/jjalh/alhrd/202501/t20250109_11529425.htm)

<sup>8</sup> Foreign Ministry of the People's Republic of China, "Wáng Yì: Shíxiàn bàndǎo wúhéhuà yǔ bàndǎo tínghé jìzhì zhuǎnhuàn bīngxíng tuījìn [Wang Yi: Realizing the denuclearization of the Peninsula and the transition from an armistice to a peace mechanism should be advanced in parallel]," February 17, 2016, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/wjzb\\_673089/zyhd\\_673091/201602/t20160217\\_7469993.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/wjzb_673089/zyhd_673091/201602/t20160217_7469993.shtml)

<sup>9</sup> United States Forces Korea. "ROK-U.S. Joint Announcement," February 7, 2016.

<https://www.usfk.mil/Media/Newsroom/News/Article/651588/rok-us-joint-announcement/>

<sup>10</sup> Foreign Ministry of the People's Republic of China, "Jǐ jì jiàn xíng Yàzhōu ānquánguān gòngchàng Yàtài ānquán xīn wèilái: Wàijì āobù fùbùzhǎng Liú Zhènmin zài "Yàtài dìqū ānquán jiàgòu yǔ dàguó guānxi" guóji yántǎohuì kāimùshì shàng de zhīcí [Vice Foreign Minister Liu Zhenmin Attends Seminar on 'Security Framework and Major Power Relations in the Asia Pacific Region']," July 12, 2016, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/ziliao\\_674904/zyjh\\_674906/201607/t20160712\\_7945675.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/ziliao_674904/zyjh_674906/201607/t20160712_7945675.shtml)

<sup>11</sup> Abraham Ait, "Is North Korea's MiG-29 Fleet Growing?" *The Diplomat*, November 29, 2018. <https://thediplomat.com/2018/11/is-north-koreas-mig-29-fleet-growing/>

<sup>12</sup> Takeshi Watanabe, "Bōei Sangyō ni Mieru Riarizumu to Hi-Riarizumu [Realism and Non-Realism Seen in the Defense Industries]," *Kokusai Anzen Hoshō* [International Security] 51, no. 4, 12.

<sup>13</sup> "Respected Comrade Kim Jong Un Visits Komsomolsk-on-Amur Yuri Gagarin Aviation Plant," *KCNA*, September 16, 2023.

<sup>14</sup> "Treaty on Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between the Democratic People's Republic of Korea and the Russian Federation," *KCNA*, June 19, 2024.

<sup>15</sup> "WPK Central Military Commission Highly Praises Combat Sub-units of Armed Forces of DPRK for Performing Heroic Feats in Operations to Liberate Kursk Area of Russian Federation," *KCNA*, April 28, 2025.

<sup>16</sup> The Kremlin, "Address by the President of the Russian Federation," February 24, 2022.

<http://www.en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/67843>

<sup>17</sup> North Korea's position during its alignment with Russia has been that it shares "the common ideal and goal" with Moscow and that the militaries and peoples of the two countries are jointly confronting "the U.S. brigandish strategy for world domination" (during Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu's visit to Pyongyang in July 2023). It has also asserted that the two states form "the common front to frustrate the imperialists' military threat and provocation" (at the Putin–Kim Jong Un summit in September 2023). Unlike President Putin, however, North Korea has never justified the invasion of Ukraine by invoking international law such as the UN Charter. "Respected Comrade Kim Jong Un Hosts Reception for Russian Military Delegation," *KCNA*, July 28, 2023; "Respected Comrade Kim Jong Un Has Talks with Russian President," September 14, 2023.

<sup>18</sup> "Respected Comrade Kim Jong Un Has Talks with President Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin," *KCNA*, June 20, 2024.

<sup>19</sup> "Speech of Respected Comrade Kim Jong Un at Military Parade to Celebrate 80th Founding Anniversary of WPK," *KCNA*, October 11, 2025.

## PROFILE

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