



# **Kim Jong Un Takes the Stage: A New Chapter in Relations between China and North Korea**

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## **KIM JONG UN TAKES THE STAGE: A NEW CHAPTER IN RELATIONS BETWEEN CHINA AND NORTH KOREA**

Kim Jong Un took part in Beijing's Victory Day celebrations as a guest of honor and held bilateral talks with Xi Jinping. Taken together, these moves point to a new stage in China–North Korea relations. Although Beijing has done much in recent decades to keep the North Korean economy alive, it has also supported UN sanctions, leading to a relationship marked by contradictions. Now, however, China has clearly decided to deepen ties, accepting the risks that come with it. Xi's goal is to restore China's influence over Pyongyang, which in recent years has drifted increasingly toward Russia. At the same time, Beijing's high-profile display of support for Kim carries a broader message to the West: China and its partners are intent on building a multipolar world order, are willing to act in concert, and will not be constrained by Western sanctions. For North Korea, this translates to a significant expansion in the country's room for maneuver—something Kim will likely try to exploit. These developments could also push the U.S. alliance system in East Asia toward even greater cohesion.

### **GOOD NEIGHBOR, GOOD FRIEND**

The biggest winner of Beijing's Victory Day celebrations in early September was arguably Kim Jong Un. At the military parade, the North Korean leader was seated directly beside Xi Jinping and, along with Vladimir Putin, was treated as a guest of honor. By contrast, the twenty-some other heads of state and government were relegated to the background. For Kim, the occasion was particularly meaningful: It was the first multilateral international event he had ever attended and only his second trip abroad

since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. His prominence was not limited to the parade itself. The following day, he held several hours of official talks with Xi, after which the Chinese president and party leader hosted him for tea and a dinner banquet. Only Putin received comparable honors during the flurry of diplomatic activity in Beijing in September.

All this underscores just how dramatically North Korea's position has shifted in recent years. A decade ago, at Beijing's previous Victory Day celebrations, it was [South Korea's president](#) who stood in the front row on the balcony overlooking Tiananmen square while the Democratic People's Republic of Korea was treated as a pariah by the international community. Even China and Russia voted in favor of UN sanctions against Pyongyang at the time. During Donald Trump's first presidential term, there were attempts to address the Korean Peninsula's problems—including high-level summits—but these efforts collapsed completely after the [failure in Hanoi](#).

Following the outbreak of the pandemic in 2020, North Korea [sealed itself off](#) from the outside world for years, reducing its already modest foreign trade to a bare minimum, even with China. The country, isolated to begin with, slipped into even deeper isolation. In contrast, Kim Jong Un's recent appearance on the global stage alongside the leaders of two of the world's major powers, China and Russia, repositions him as an important player in international politics.

Kim's new role was primarily made possible by China, which deliberately choreographed the celebrations in this way. The prominent place on the podium at the military parade, the circumstances of the bilateral talks, and the official statements all indicated that Beijing deliberately put North Korea back in the international spotlight and did everything it could to boost Kim's prestige—and win his trust. Xi Jinping [also stated](#) that China and North Korea are “good neighbors, good friends, and good comrades,” the sincerity of which we may of course doubt, but the point is not whether Xi meant it seriously but rather what he wanted to convey.

## RISKS AND POTENTIAL CONSEQUENCES

However, China's decision carries [serious risks](#). Its spectacular show of support for Kim Jong Un further damages China's reputation in the Western world, where North Korea has long been one of the most negatively viewed countries. But Beijing is not becoming any more attractive to most countries outside the West, either, by declaring its close partnership with the North Korean regime, as the DPRK is not particularly popular anywhere. China likes to appear as the leader of the Global South, but the Global South does not necessarily want to align itself with a China–North Korea–Russia trio.

The gesture could also unsettle America's allies in East Asia: Japan and South Korea may interpret the noticeable rapprochement with Pyongyang as a threat. Tokyo and Seoul have been trying to strike a careful balance in recent years, as while their security continues to be guaranteed by the United States, China is their number one economic partner, and they have been careful not to burn bridges with it. During Donald Trump's second term as president, their [shaken confidence](#) in Washington's reliability prompted both countries to [move closer to China](#) in 2025. Now, however, the ceremonial stand alongside Kim, who continues to threaten them, may deter them from continuing this rapprochement in the future. In fact, the event may prompt Trump to rethink his East Asia policy, especially given his longstanding interest in North Korea.

By publicly supporting Kim Jong Un, China risks strengthening—rather than weakening—cooperation between the United States, Japan, and South Korea. One dangerous consequence of this is that, citing the North Korean nuclear threat, forces in South Korea and Japan are becoming increasingly vocal in their calls for the development of their own nuclear weapons. Such aspirations are reinforced by the erosion of confidence in U.S. security guarantees: If allies do not trust Washington to defend them under any circumstances, they may see the possession of their own nuclear weapons as the [most effective deterrent](#). For China, however, the nuclearization of East Asia would be highly undesirable:

The proliferation of nuclear weapons would pose a direct security threat to Beijing and reduce its room for maneuver. Although China does not openly support Kim's nuclear ambitions, a spectacular alliance with Pyongyang could strengthen pro-nuclear sentiments in South Korea and Japan. Moreover, for the first time in the history of Xi–Kim summits, China [did not publicly express](#) its support for the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, which represents a diplomatic victory for Kim and essentially recognition of North Korea as a nuclear power, sending a very bad message to America's allies in East Asia.

## PYONGYANG'S PEACOCK DANCE

This raises the question: Why did Beijing allow Kim Jong Un to step so prominently into the spotlight? The answer lies in several factors. Above all, from China's perspective, North Korea has drifted uncomfortably close to Russia since 2022. Pyongyang has long been adept at maneuvering between Moscow and Beijing—a tactic dating back to the 1950s—playing one side against the other in order to maximize the support it receives. Like his father and grandfather, Kim Jong Un [continues to follow this strategy](#) today. During the first two decades of the twenty-first century, however, China's growing economic dominance gradually tied the North Korean regime more tightly to Beijing. China played a critical role in keeping North Korea's economy afloat, which naturally translated into political influence as well. It is telling that during the Trump–Kim summits, Kim regularly consulted with Xi Jinping, a clear sign that his foreign policy could not be shaped entirely independently.

The escalation of the war in Ukraine in 2022, however, created a [new situation](#) for North Korea. It offered Pyongyang an opportunity to ease its one-sided dependence on China and to open up toward Russia. As is well known, North Korea supported Moscow with ammunition, weapons, and even troops, receiving—as far as can be determined—military technologies in return. The partnership between Russia and North Korea grew so close that the two countries even signed a [mutual defense treaty](#) last year.

China took note of this shift and was [hardly pleased](#) that North Korea, traditionally regarded as part of its own sphere of influence, gained so much room for maneuver. The high-profile treatment Kim received in Beijing, both at the summit and at the parade, suggests that Xi Jinping is seeking to reassert China's influence over Pyongyang. For Beijing, [maintaining constant control](#) over developments on the Korean Peninsula is of vital importance. On the one hand, China cannot allow the North Korean regime to collapse, as the risks would be immense: not only the prospect of millions of refugees flooding into China and the uncertain fate of Pyongyang's nuclear arsenal, but also the danger that a reunified Korea under southern leadership would bring U.S. troops right up to China's border. For Beijing, this would be nothing short of a strategic nightmare—the very scenario that prompted its intervention in the Korean War in 1950.

Equally important for Beijing is preventing Pyongyang from becoming too independent. An overly autonomous North Korea could easily drag China into conflicts it has no desire to fight. One need only recall Kim Il Sung's decision to launch the Korean War, which pulled China into a bloody confrontation. This is why Beijing today still seeks to limit Kim Jong Un's freedom of action—preserving both stability and its own influence on the peninsula.

## THROWING DOWN THE GAUNTLET

Beijing also has economic reasons for maintaining strong ties with North Korea. China's northeastern provinces—often referred to as the country's rust belt—have long struggled with economic difficulties. For them, North Korea is an important [trading partner](#), providing a measure of demand and supplying raw materials to local industries. The country is particularly rich in mineral resources, and access to these assets offers China a strategic advantage. North Korean raw materials have been integrated into Chinese supply chains, making a stable bilateral relationship not only a political interest but also a direct economic one for Beijing.

Beijing's decision to give Kim Jong Un such a prominent role was almost certainly also influenced by a desire to send a [clear message](#) to the Western world. Joint appearances of Xi, Putin, and Kim suggest the emergence of a new pole in Eurasia, with China naturally as the dominant power. States within this circle demonstrate their disregard for Western sanctions, openly support one another, and resist external pressure. The signal is equally directed at the rest of the countries of the Global South: There is life—and influence—beyond the West, and countries need not yield to various U.S. demands.

Kim's prominent role thus fits neatly into China's broader grand strategy, aimed at reshaping the world order and fostering a multipolar system. Beijing's goal is to transcend the Western-led international order, weaken American dominance, and build a multipolar world in which China is a key driver of global processes. Within this context, the risks and challenges associated with the North Korean relationship pale in comparison, as the strategic objective, consolidating China's global position, far outweighs potential regional tensions or minor losses of prestige.

## CAN YOU HEAR OUR THUNDER?

While rising regional tensions are a negative development for both China and the United States—one they are willing to accept only in pursuit of higher, global strategic goals—they are distinctly advantageous for North Korea. The passage of time and the regime's behavior have repeatedly contradicted assumptions that it might collapse within a foreseeable period, that Pyongyang would eventually follow the path of Chinese reforms starting in 1978 and, by gradually opening its economy, develop an interest in more peaceful regional relations, or that it might be willing to abandon its nuclear program in exchange for relief from sanctions. According to the North Korean regime's internal logic, its survival depends precisely on maintaining a permanent "survivor mode" and defensive rogue-state posture. This approach allows it to thrive in times when great powers heighten their competition rather than search for compromise, because



as a proxy it can extract far greater benefits than it could during times of peace. By enjoying the active support of both Beijing and Moscow, North Korea not only maximizes support but also reduces its dependence on any single power.

It is therefore no accident that Kim Jong Un broke with his previous isolation from multilateral diplomacy to appear at Beijing's Victory Day parade. The China–North Korea–Russia axis points to the emergence of a regional order in which Pyongyang's room for maneuver is significantly expanded. The message is clear for the United States and, more importantly, reinforces North Korea's strategic objectives: namely, that Beijing and Moscow actively support its survival, and that “Western adversaries” must accept the peninsula's division and North Korea's nuclear status. Since Kim Il Sung's death, the regime has harbored no illusions that U.S. interests in guaranteeing South Korea's security are temporary or that a reunification under the North Korean flag is feasible. This stance [became official](#) in December 2023, when Pyongyang metaphorically and literally began [burning bridges](#) between the two Koreas and removed the goal of reunification from its constitution. The rise of the China–North Korea–Russia axis gives Pyongyang a particularly strong bargaining position ahead of the [potential continuation](#) of Trump–Kim negotiations, hinted at by both the U.S. president and [statements from Pyongyang](#). In the current situation, Washington must entice Kim to the negotiating table—not the other way around—and there are few levers in the U.S. toolkit that North Korea cannot access through Beijing or Moscow.

If Western allies accept that North Korea will not relinquish its nuclear weapons, this could further deepen the U.S.–Japan–South Korea trilateral defense cooperation. Yet this development is not contrary to Pyongyang's interests, as deeper regional fissures enhance its position and secure continued support from Beijing and Moscow. As long as tensions remain at a relatively manageable level, North Korea is in an ideal position to extract material benefits, primarily to sustain the living standards of its elite, while continuing to develop its nuclear arsenal so that it has the greatest possible deterrent and retaliatory capabilities.

## TWO TRIOS

The recent events in Beijing point toward the emergence of a China–North Korea–Russia axis, alongside the tightening of the opposing U.S.–Japan–South Korea alliance. In a deteriorating security environment—in which Pyongyang, emboldened by the backing of Beijing and Moscow, is likely to provoke more boldly—Seoul and Tokyo could see intensified militarization and growing ambitions to acquire nuclear capabilities, facing off against three nuclear powers amid increasingly uncertain U.S. security guarantees. Rising regional tensions will tie up a significant portion of Washington’s attention and resources, and it is not inconceivable that Cold War-era dynamics could reemerge, not only through bloc-like divisions but also through the redeployment of U.S. tactical nuclear weapons to allied territories. This could further shift U.S. focus away from Europe, leaving the resolution of the conflict in Ukraine and the Old Continent’s security increasingly in the hands of its regional partners.



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