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Kim Jong Un's Attendance at China's Victory Day Parade and the Outlook for DPRK-China-Russia Relations

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On September 3, North Korean leader Kim Jong Un attended the 80th anniversary parade of the "Victory of the Chinese People's War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression and the World Anti-Fascist War" in Beijing, standing alongside Chinese President Xi Jinping and Russian President Vladimir Putin to showcase the strategic solidarity of North Korea, China, and Russia.

North Korea's Calculations Surrounding Attendance at China's Victory Day

First, the primary motivation for Kim Jong Un was to recalibrate North Korea's relationship with China, which had been relatively distant compared with its ties to Russia. By demonstrating a willingness to actively cooperate with China, Pyongyang likely hoped to secure greater diplomatic and economic support.

Second, this diplomatic maneuver can also be read as an appeal for stronger backing from Russia, which has flaunted its deepening ties with North Korea since 2023. For Pyongyang, Russia's contributions may not have been sufficient. In 2024, Russia failed to rank among North Korea's top ten foreign trading partners, suggesting it had not provided the level of military support North Korea had expected. Moreover, Russia's Victory Day offered an ideal opportunity to glorify North Korean casualties in the Ukraine war as propaganda, yet Kim Jong Un delayed the heroization of the fallen until late August. This timing hints at subtle frictions between Pyongyang and Moscow beneath the surface of their outward solidarity.

Third, Kim Jong Un appears to believe that tightening cooperation with China and Russia will also strengthen his hand in future negotiations with the United States. To demonstrate

that time is on North Korea's side in its contest of wills with Washington, Pyongyang deemed it necessary to reaffirm its alignment with its traditional patron, China, and further bolster trilateral solidarity with both China and Russia.

Fourth, Kim Jong Un likely aimed to highlight his achievement of building North Korea into a so-called "strategic state"—one capable of standing shoulder to shoulder with great powers—and to showcase this status to his people through his participation.

Finally, North Korea also sought to stir debate within South Korea's domestic discourse on North Korea policy. The argument would be that the ROK-U.S.-Japan trilateral summits from August 23 to 27 inadvertently strengthened the North Korea–China–Russia axis, thereby destabilizing the situation on the Korean Peninsula. From this angle, Pyongyang hoped to encourage voices in South Korea arguing that, rather than relying solely on the U.S.–ROK alliance and trilateral security cooperation, South Korea should instead restore relations with China and Russia and adopt a more conciliatory stance toward North Korea.

China's Intent Behind Inviting Kim Jong Un

Several motives appear to underlie China's shift in attitude.

First, by showcasing friendly relations with Russia and North Korea, Beijing sought to secure leverage in its competition with Washington. Although China had an interest in helping bring the Ukraine war to an earlier close as a political achievement, it also likely recognized the strategic value of restoring ties with Moscow: namely, to create fissures in Russia–China relations and prevent China's isolation. On August 15, with the U.S.–Russia summit in Alaska yielding no concrete results and the prospect of Russia–Ukraine talks remaining uncertain, China instead highlighted its close ties with Moscow, first at the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) summit and then at the Victory Day celebrations. In doing so, Beijing created room to use its relationship with Russia as a form of leverage in future negotiations with the Trump administration, which is eager to see an early end to the Ukraine war.

Second, the invitation reflected China's intent to reaffirm its influence over North Korea and, on that basis, to constrain South Korea's policy alignment with the United States. Since the June 2025 South Korean presidential election, Beijing had expressed hopes for a reset in Seoul–Beijing relations, thus Beijing anticipated that the new South Korean administration would pursue a balance between Washington and Beijing. Yet the Lee administration instead signaled a prioritization of the U.S.–ROK alliance and trilateral cooperation with Japan through the recent Korea–Japan and Korea–U.S. summits. Against this backdrop, China's official announcement on August 28 of Kim Jong Un's attendance at the Victory Day celebrations, timed immediately after President Lee's return from Washington, can be read as a form of pressure on Seoul.

Third, Beijing intended to hint at the possibility of a China-led North Korea–China–Russia alignment to slow down the pace of U.S.-led security cooperation in the region. In particular, since the launch of Japan's Joint Operations Command in March and proposals such as "One Theater" and "alliance modernization," including discussions over U.S. Forces Korea's strategic flexibility and the widening scope of alliance commitments, China has grown wary that Washington's regional alliance network is shifting squarely against it. From this perspective, signaling the potential for a China-driven trilateral bloc was aimed at constraining the expansion of U.S.-led security cooperation in the Indo-Pacific.

Prospects for Future North Korea–China–Russia Cooperation and Recommendations on ROK's Policy Response

Through the Victory Day military parade, Xi Jinping signaled China's intent to lead an anti-U.S. and anti-Western coalition while strengthening ties with North Korea and Russia. However, there remain limits to the possibility of the three countries operating as a fully integrated trilateral bloc. Even during the Cold War, the only time the three acted as a single, unified coalition was in the early 1950s during the Korean War. These differences will continue to constrain the three from achieving seamless policy alignment—particularly in the military domain. Instead, the pattern is likely to be one of selective coordination, with North Korea–Russia, North Korea–China, and China–Russia bilateral ties forming the main pillars of interaction.

This also suggests that China's future steps after inviting Kim Jong Un are likely to be measured rather than dramatic. Kim's attendance at China's Victory Day celebrations does not in itself signify a fundamental transformation of North Korea–China relations. Still, Beijing's willingness to use the "North Korea card" as leverage in U.S.–China relations and with other regional states indicates that China is likely to expand its diplomatic and economic support for Pyongyang. Even if North Korea were to conduct another nuclear test or launch an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM), China would be unlikely to support tougher sanctions or participate in international condemnation. Instead, Beijing is expected to expand group tourism to North Korea, strengthen economic exchanges, and deepen North Korea's dependence on China as a means of managing the relationship. To underscore the recovery of bilateral ties, Xi Jinping might even consider a second visit to North Korea, following his June 2019 trip, as a reciprocal gesture to Kim's attendance.

Still, in the military domain, China is reluctant to escalate confrontation with the United States, making significant Chinese military support to North Korea unlikely. Notably, while bilateral meetings took place during the Victory Day period, no trilateral summit was held. This absence itself reflects Beijing's caution in avoiding an image of a united DPRK–China–Russia front aimed directly against Washington. That said, the possibility of including North Korea in future China–Russia joint military drills, as a symbolic gesture of trilateral solidarity, remains open and warrants close monitoring.

Additionally, the trajectory of the Ukraine war will shape North Korea–Russia dynamics. Once the war concludes, Moscow's need for North Korean military assistance will diminish considerably, raising doubts over whether Russia will reward Pyongyang at the level it expects. North Korea, for its part, is also wary that leaning too heavily on Russia could erode its autonomy. Pyongyang will likely push for large-scale Russian support not only for its nuclear program but also for modernizing its conventional forces. Yet it remains uncertain whether Russia, in the aftermath of the war, will divert advanced weapons and resources to North Korea.

With these points in mind, the following policy directions are required.

First, South Korea's current strategic priority lies in strengthening the ROK–U.S. alliance and maintaining ROK-U.S.-Japan trilateral cooperation. In his speech at the Victory Day military parade, Xi Jinping said the world was facing a choice between peace and war, and stressed solidarity among participating countries to safeguard peace. However, in reality, it is little more than an emphasis on authoritarian cooperation. Thus, even if there is outward pushback, preserving the strategic assets of the ROK–U.S. alliance and the trilateral cooperation actually enhances leverage over China and Russia. In the end, both China and Russia will also seek to restore relations with Seoul, given their competition with Washington.

Second, South Korea must underscore the legitimacy of the ROK–U.S. alliance and trilateral cooperation, highlighting that they are not aimed at containing any specific country but at safeguarding international stability and norms. To this end, it is necessary to refine counter-arguments and deepen coordination with like-minded countries.

Third, within the context of North Korea–China–Russia cooperation, vigilance is needed against the possibility that China and Russia may give tacit recognition or even support North Korea's nuclear program. Russia is already suspected of providing indirect support, and China fueled suspicion at the recent summit by avoiding the term "denuclearization." While it is difficult to conclude that Beijing has immediately shifted its stance, the likelihood of Chinese support for sanctions evasion has grown. Therefore, South Korea must emphasize the threat posed by North Korea's nuclear program not only to the Korean Peninsula but also to the global non-proliferation regime, and point out the contradictions of Beijing and Moscow failing to uphold their responsibilities.

Fourth, at every summit, South Korea and the United States should consistently reaffirm the goal of "Complete Denuclearization of North Korea." Neglecting this could create the misunderstanding that Washington tacitly accepts Pyongyang's nuclear status and is instead pursuing arms-control talks, which could also be exploited by North Korean propaganda. It is therefore necessary to block any move toward a full lifting of sanctions or hasty normalization of relations and to preserve the shared objective of complete denuclearization. To this end, the two allies should make clear that they will not tolerate North Korea's nuclear

program and should consider pursuing a strong retaliatory posture and visible extended deterrence measures (e.g., redeployment of tactical nuclear weapons).

Finally, while North Korea–China–Russia ties may not yet amount to a direct military alliance, symbolic solidarity could lead to Pyongyang joining in combined exercises. In such a case, North Korea might attempt new provocations, such as incursions into Korea's Air Defense Identification Zone (KADIZ), to undermine readiness. Accordingly, the ROK and the United States must develop countermeasures for scenarios involving joint provocations by North Korea, China, and Russia. Doing so would ultimately force Pyongyang to recognize the futility of its nuclear development and provocations, paving the way toward peace on the Korean Peninsula.

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