

Geopolitics is moving North Korea's way

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In less than three years, the erosion in the US hegemony that began cascading with the defeat in Afghanistan in August 2021 spread to Eurasia, followed by the massive eruption in West Asia by the end of 2023. As 2024 begins, we hear distant drums in the Far East, as North Korea's supreme leader Kim Jong Un instinctively senses a rare alignment of positive factors appearing in the existential conflicts in Eurasia and West Asia and capitalises on it with a strategic shift to challenge what Pyongyang calls a US-led 'Asian version of NATO'.

The Korean Central News Agency [reported](#) on a statement from the country's Foreign Ministry that North Korea "warmly welcomes President Putin to visit Pyongyang and is ready to greet the Korean people's closest friend with the greatest sincerity."

**President Vladimir Putin (3rd from Right) met North Korean Foreign Minister Choe Son Hui (3rd from Left),
Moscow, Jan. 16, 2024**

Kim, an astute practitioner of geopolitics, aims to create synergy through a strategic fusion that actually dates back to Joseph Stalin who purposefully sought to entangle the US in a military conflict on the Korean Peninsula and forestall the outbreak of a third world war.

Stalin's calculation was that a US, exhausted from the Chinese intervention in the Korean War, "would be incapable of a third world war in the near future." Indeed, he was proven right.

Stalin wrote a highly confidential letter to then Czechoslovak President Klement Gottwald on 27 August 1950 to explain his decision-making, which found its way from the ex-Soviet archives in 2005. It appeared in the original Russian in the historical journal *Novaya / Noveishaya Istoriya*.

Apparently, Stalin went along secretly with Kim Il Sung's plan, during the North Korean leader's secret trip to Moscow in April 1950, not because he miscalculated that the US would not get involved in the war (as western historians estimated) but precisely because he wanted the US to become entangled in a limited conflict in Asia.

Stalin was reassuring Gottwald, a nervous ally, about the international situation and Moscow's decision to withdraw from the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) in January 1950 and the rationale for the Soviet absence from the UNSC in July 1950 when it discussed the Korean issue as well as the Soviet abstention and failure to exercise its veto against the US resolution seeking deployment of a UN force in Korea.

Stalin wrote that "it is clear that the United States of America is presently distracted from Europe in the Far East. Does it not give us an advantage in the global balance of power? It

undoubtedly does.”

Put differently, Europe was the main priority in the Soviet Union’s international strategy, and the Korean War was seen as an opportunity to strengthen socialism in Europe while diverting American interests and resources from that continent.

What distinguishes great powers like Russia is the sheer profundity of their historical consciousness to co-relate time past with time present and to comprehend that the germane seeds of time future are largely to be found embedded in time past. After all, time cannot be treated in abstraction but as the vital ground of human reality. That must be one reason why there is such [agonising speculation](#) in the US today regarding the recent surge in Russia-DPRK ties.

The White House’s senior director for arms control Pranay Vaddi said last Thursday that the nature of the security threat posed by North Korea could change “drastically” in the coming decade as a result of its unprecedented cooperation with Russia. “What we’re seeing between Russia and North Korea is an unprecedented level of cooperation in the military sphere,” [Vaddi told Washington’s Center for Strategic and International Studies think tank](#). He added, “And I say ‘unprecedented’ very deliberately — We have never seen this before.”

Vaddi said it was necessary to pay close attention not just to nuclear-armed North Korea’s help for Russia war in Ukraine, primarily in the form of missile systems, but “what could be going in the other direction as well.”

He asked, “How could that improve North Korea’s capabilities? And what does that mean for our own extended deterrence posture in the region with both Korea and Japan?” The US has got Russia’s message alright.

Vaddi’s remarks that were anything but off-the-cuff, followed the 5-day official visit by the DPRK Foreign Minister Choe Son-hui to Moscow during which Putin, in a rare gesture, received the visiting dignitary at the Kremlin. The [Russian readout](#) taunted the Americans by cryptically characterising Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s talks with Choe as “a meaningful exchange of opinions on topical matters dealing with developing bilateral ties with a focus on “practical matters” and “further improve the contractual legal framework.” Readouts seldom go that far in transparency.

Anyway, the point of reference was the implementation of “agreements” between Putin and Kim during their meeting in September at the Vostochny Space Launch Centre (Russian spaceport above the 51st parallel North in the Amur Oblast in the Russian Far East).

Commenting on minister Choe’s meeting with Putin, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov asserted that North Korea “is our very important partner, and we are focused on the further development of our relations in all areas, including in sensitive areas.”

In essence, as a Reuters report took note, “Moscow says it will develop ties with whatever countries it wants... Russia has gone out of its way to publicise the renaissance of its relationship, including military ties, with North Korea.... For Putin,.. courting Kim allows him to needle Washington and its Asian allies.”

Indeed, Kim is keen to play his role as well. In the past week alone, North Korea conducted a test of its underwater nuclear weapons system and Kim [announced that unification with](#)

[South Korea is no longer possible](#). Kim said the North “did not want war, but we also have no intention of avoiding it.”

Without doubt, Russia has chosen to double down on its alliance with North Korea. And Kim expressed his interest in deepening ties with Moscow in a highly public manner by [making a personal visit](#) to Russia in September. The timing of that trip was bold given recent moves by the US to [strengthen trilateral deterrence](#) efforts against the North with South Korea and Japan.

A de facto trilateral ‘bloc’ with Russia and China in opposition to the [US-South Korea-Japan trilateral alliance](#) is in the making. DPRK’s support for Russia in Ukraine would serve China’s interests by containing US power. And North Korea gains immeasurably in strategic depth, thanks to the support by two veto-holding UN Security Council members.

A press release by the foreign ministry in Pyongyang following minister Choe’s talks in Moscow said “The DPRK side highly appreciated the important mission and role of the powerful Russian Federation in maintaining the strategic stability and balance of the world and expressed expectation that the Russian Federation would continue to adhere to independent policies and lines in all fields in the future, too, and thus make a great contribution to international peace and security and the establishment of an equal and fair international order.”

Tass played up the press release, carving no less than 3 wholesome reports out of it. In effect, a new geopolitical vector is appearing in the Far East, which, unlike Ukraine or Gaza, is also a nuclear flashpoint. Geopolitics is moving North Korea’s way, finally — a country that seven years ago was already harbouring dreams of [sinking a US nuclear-powered aircraft carrier](#) “with a single strike”. The point is, that fantasy remains untested.

In politics, the underdog often starts the fight — and occasionally the upper dog deserves to win, but seldom does. Hamas, the Houthis, Kim — it’s always fun to surprise people. For, it puts less pressure on them, as they’re only a winning mindset away from battles that could transform an underdog into a champion and achiever. Putin’s journey to Pyongyang will be carefully watched by the Biden administration.

Andrey Sushentsov, a prominent Russian pundit, [wrote recently](#), “Our confrontation with the Americans will last for a long time, although we will see certain pauses... Russia’s task will be to create a network of relationships with like-minded states, which may even eventually include some from the West. The US strategy is to forcibly extinguish points of strategic autonomy, which Washington succeeded in doing in Western Europe in the first phase of the Ukraine crisis, but that move was one of the last successes in this regard.

At any rate, an eastern front is opening in the US-Russia confrontation, supplementing the western and southern fronts in Eurasia and West Asia respectively.

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