

North-East Asia and beyond: Fruitless “joint struggle” between nuclear states

Tuesday 10 October 2023, by [YAMANAKA Karen](#) (Date first published: 4 October 2023).

On 13 September, Vladimir Putin and Kim Jong-un met at the Russian launch base at the Vostotchny cosmodrome. The meeting was organized at Putin’s insistence. Kim Jong-un’s visit to Russia is aimed at strengthening military and security cooperation between Russia and North Korea. [1] No document of agreement was issued and no joint press conference was held after the meeting.

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However, it is clear that both countries’ respective national interests were pursued at the meeting. Kim Jong-un was welcomed by Putin during his visit to Russia, showing Putin’s extreme concern about the current situation in Russia caused by his invasion of Ukraine on 24 February last year. Putin has recently taken hostile military actions against neighbouring countries in the Far East and has strengthened military ties with North Korea. China, on the other hand, has watched the recent Russian-North Korean rapprochement with mixed feelings.

Reversal of position from previous Putin-Kim meeting

It was the Kim Jong-un’s second summit with Putin, after the pair met in 2019. The meeting, the first in four years, highlighted the solidarity between the two countries against “imperialist military intimidation”. It shows that both countries’ perceptions of the US are different from those of 2019. Putin’s title has been upgraded from “Your Excellency” to “Comrade”. It shows North Korea’s assessment that Russia is more united in its “anti-imperialism” than China. It was Russia, not North Korea, that proposed the meeting. Unlike the 2019 meeting, the relationship between the two countries was reversed due to the pressing issue of securing artillery shells on the Russian side. Putin, who has a habit of being late, showed an unusual attitude by arriving at the meeting place 30 minutes early to wait for Kim Jong-un. After his meeting with Putin, Kim Jong-un travelled to Vladivostok. He then returned home without any prior plans, on an itinerary marked by generous treatment from Russia, including an introduction to Russian military intelligence.

Putin's impatience and fear of neighbouring countries

Putin's impatience is reflected in his unusual treatment of Kim Jong-un. The Russian army is currently facing an uphill battle in the war in Ukraine with the Ukrainian counteroffensive to retake territory. In addition, the large-scale military exercises that have been held every year in different regions of Russia have been cancelled this year. [2] Isolated by the war in Ukraine, Putin's impatience also became a fear of Russia's neighbouring countries. Putin's impatience was clearly shown at the commemoration of the end of the Second World War in Sakhalin, in the Russian Far East, which was held for the first time on September 3 this year. A small military parade was held during the first commemorative ceremony attended by former Russian President Dmitry Medvedev. But it was a small march, not far from the military parade in Moscow. This is the reality of the Russian army in Sakhalin. These situations have also led to Russia's hostile military actions against neighbouring countries in the Far East, which have led it to strengthen military ties with North Korea.

China's position on the situation in Ukraine

The Putin-Kim meeting also highlighted China's complex and delicate political position. Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Mao Ning was asked about China's position on the Putin-Kim meeting at a regular press briefing on September 12, just before the meeting. Mao avoided directly answering the question. The fact that the Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson declined to give an assessment of the Putin-Kim meeting indicates that China's position on Kim Jong-un's visit to Russia is complex and delicate. On September 13, the day after the regular press briefing, the China Central Television (CCTV) reported on the Putin-Kim meeting. The CCTV assessed the meeting as a strengthening of Russian-North Korean military power and a more hard-line stance against the US. They said that the tough US approach to North Korea had brought Russia and North Korea closer together. North Korea has expressed support for the Russian invasion of Ukraine. China, on the other hand, has adopted a neutral stance and has not officially announced any arms assistance to Russia. Russia and North Korea have clearly defined the current situation as the "New Cold War" and have taken a confrontational stance towards the US. But China is avoiding an all-out confrontation with the US.

North Korea's and Russia's respective intentions

At the Putin-Kim meeting, North Korea sought to obtain maximum support from Russia in exchange for military supplies and other assistance to the extent that it would not affect its own defence. Russian support means the country's accumulated expertise in the mass production, maintenance and operation of nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles in North Korea. North Korea also needs Russian technology for strategic weapons and satellite launches. But the mass production, maintenance and operation of weapons requires an economic base. The North Korean regime is facing a severely deteriorated economic situation due to international sanctions, floods, and the Covid-19 pandemic. [8]

KAREN YAMANAKA

Footnotes

- [1] Korean Central Television (KCTV) reported that Kim Jong-un left Pyongyang Station on September 11 for a visit to Russia. An unusual situation was confirmed in that core members of the military, including North Korea's military number 1 and 2, accompanied the group.
- [2] Russia's Minister of Defence Sergei Shoigu has confirmed that the military exercises Zapad-2023 will not be happening this year on September 5.
- [3] Karen Yamanaka, IVP, 29 August 2023, "[Pakistan : La CSI se joint à la PWF pour demander la restauration de la démocratie](#)".
- [4] KCNA, 29 November 2017, "DPRK Gov't Statement on Successful Test-fire of New-Type ICBM"
- [5] KCNA, 8 August 2017, "KAPPC Spokesman Rejects Anti-DPRK"Sanctions Resolution".
- [6] Justin McCurry and agencies, *The Guardian*, 15 September 2023, "[Putin and Kim Jong-un exchange rifles as North Korean leader continues Russia tour](#)".
- [7] Alona Liasheva, Ashley Smith, 25 February 2023, ESSF (article 66014), "[A Ukrainian Socialist Lays Out the Aims and Struggles of Her Country's Left](#)".
- [8] Pierre Rousset, ESSF, 17 September 2023, "[The Putin-Kim meeting in Vostotchny](#)"