

<https://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article8274>



Nuclear states

Fruitless "joint struggle" between nuclear states

- IV Online magazine - 2023 - IV585 - October 2023 -

Publication date: Tuesday 10 October 2023

Copyright © International Viewpoint - online socialist magazine - All rights reserved

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.

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. [3]

The country's current situation makes it difficult to mass produce nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles. And North Korea cannot afford to offer Russia the latest missiles and special forces in the context of the recent US and South Korean military pressure on North Korea. So the amount of weapons and troops that North Korea provides to Russia is limited and the situation in Ukraine will not change dramatically. Moreover, North Korea's anticipated military objectives could lead to even tougher sanctions and increased scrutiny of the country by the Western powers, particularly the US. In some cases, there is the possibility of full-scale military sanctions by the US. Such a situation could lead to a confrontation with China, which would not tolerate a crisis situation, and to rifts between China, Russia, and North Korea. North Korea wants to avoid being drawn deeper into the East-West polarization over Ukraine by fully siding with Russia. Kim Jong-un fears being made the scapegoat if the war in Ukraine escalates. This is also reflected in North Korea's contradictory actions such as proposing dialogue with Japan and negotiations with the US while making provocative statements or launching of ballistic missiles.

North Korea's political intentions

Under these circumstances, why did Kim Jong-un dare to hold the Putin-Kim meeting with Russia at this time? It was to obtain a new diplomatic card. Ballistic missile launches from the country have already become a regular occurrence. The launch of reconnaissance satellites has also been hampered by repeated failures. Nuclear testing is the country's last card. But if it is used, North Korea could lose the opportunity to enter into negotiations with the US, such as the 2019 Hanoi Summit between North Korea and the US. Since taking power, Kim Jong-un has pushed North Korea to develop nuclear weapons and missiles. North Korea successfully launched a new type of intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) in November 2017. The country declared the end of a moratorium on long-range nuclear tests and the completion of its "state nuclear force" [4], drawing international condemnation. In the same year, the international community imposed tough sanctions on North Korea.

At the time, North Korea accused China and Russia, which supported the sanctions, of being "the countries that followed the US". [5] But after that, China and Russia have come to defend North Korea, given the intensifying US-China competition as a "New Cold War" and the war in Ukraine. At present, the war in Ukraine has isolated Russia from the international community. Emphasizing good relations with Russia is a good opportunity for North Korea to shake up the US, Japan and South Korea. And the new diplomatic card is also effective for China. North Korea has been forced to rely on China to counter the sanctions imposed by UN resolutions. But support from Russia would reduce China's influence. It will also be possible to diplomatically encourage China to increase political pressure on the US, Japan and South Korea.

North-East Asia remains a hot "nuclear frontier"

At the Putin-Kim meeting, the two leaders exchanged gifts. Kim Jong-un gave the North Korean rifle and Putin gave the Russian rifle and astronaut gloves. [6] These gifts symbolize the nature of the meeting. Both countries are seeking to deepen (albeit limited) military cooperation. In addition, Russia will also help North Korea in the space sector, including launching satellites. North Korea launched two ballistic missiles into the Sea of Japan on 13 September, the day Putin and Kim Jong-un met at the Russian launch base at the Vostotchny cosmodrome.

This is the first time North Korea has launched ballistic missiles when its leader is outside country. Kim Jong-un's visit to Russia was highly performance-oriented. Launching ballistic missiles from his own country on the day of the meeting is believed to have been intended to give the summit a high profile. North Korea's nuclear and missile technology has already reached a significant level with the visits of Russian technicians to the country. But to take advantage of this, they need to significantly strengthen their own economy. North Korea's most urgent task is probably to improve its food situation rather than to build up its military force. There was no agreed document and no joint press conference to mark the meeting. The purpose seems to be to increase the spillover effects of the summit by concealing what happened in the meeting between the two leaders. But the main reason would have been to evade UN sanctions resulting from the documentation of military cooperation agreements. In conclusion, the Putin-Kim meeting did not lead to a fundamental change in the framework of military cooperation between Russia and North Korea. Russia and North Korea have no common values. The "joint struggle" between the two countries, which is based solely on the pursuit of mutual interests, is futile. Kim Jong-un's visit to Russia was made at the request of Putin. However, his decision to visit Russia under these circumstances shows that he is not a "strategic leader".

Meanwhile, the situation in North-East Asia is becoming increasingly tense. Ten days after the Putin-Kim meeting, South Korean President Yun Seok-yeol held the first major military parade in a decade amid rising tensions. He said that the use of nuclear weapons would end the North Korean regime. In response to Yun Seok-yeol's hard-line policy, North Korea enshrined the policy of strengthening its nuclear forces in the constitution at a key parliamentary session on September 26-27. The invasion of Ukraine decided by Putin is not simply a regional conflict. Russia has set in motion a process that could lead to higher levels of imperialist interventionism and possibly a Third World War between nuclear-armed powers. [7] On the other side of the globe, awareness of the uncomfortable parallels has also grown. North-East Asia remains a hot "nuclear frontier". [8]

4 October 2023

PS:

If you like this article or have found it useful, please consider donating towards the work of International Viewpoint. Simply follow this link: [Donate](#) then enter an amount of your choice. One-off donations are very welcome. But regular donations by standing order are also vital to our continuing

Fruitless "joint struggle" between nuclear states

functioning. See the last paragraph of [this article](#) for our bank account details and take out a standing order. Thanks.

[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, "[North Korea's chronic food shortages exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic](#)".

[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, IVP, 25 February 2023, "[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](#)"