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## **The Latest Kim-Putin Summit**

*By Nah Liang Tuang*

### **SYNOPSIS**

*This Kim-Putin summit has revealed that the Russia-North Korea power dynamic has changed. Russia seems more willing to proliferate strategic technology. This will have significant implications for the security situation in Northeast Asia.*

### **COMMENTARY**

Kim Jong-un's first overseas trip since the COVID-19 pandemic for a summit meeting with President Vladimir Putin at the Vostochny Cosmodrome in Eastern Russia on 13 September, as well as his [tours](#) of an aircraft factory in Komsomolsk-on-Amur and naval base at Vladivostok to view Russia's Pacific fleet on 14 and 15 September respectively, have been driving newsfeeds. But while other international summits involving Western leaders feature press conferences, and a modicum of transparency as to what was agreed upon, this round of diplomacy will remain comparatively opaque.

Consequently, analysts will have to make educated inferences about the concrete quid pro quos between Moscow and Pyongyang in the weeks and months ahead. However, what media coverage has revealed thus far is that there appears to be somewhat of a role reversal or change between the two autocratic regimes. Such a reversal or shift can be seen in the probable future large-scale supply of North Korean artillery munitions to Russia, the likely transfer of satellite technology to North Korea, and the strengthened diplomatic position of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) vis-à-vis Russia.

### **Trading Artillery Shells from North Korea to Russia**

The DPRK was founded in 1948, supported by and established with assistance from the USSR, which included military aid involving Soviet technical advisers, and funding

to build munitions factories on North Korean soil. However, the Kim regime now finds itself as a potential large-scale supplier of ammunition to the Russian Federation, having previously sent a relatively small consignment of [infantry rockets and missiles](#), during the latter half of 2022, to the Russian Wagner private mercenary company fighting at Moscow's behest in Ukraine.

Since Pyongyang supports Moscow in the latter's invasion of Ukraine, going so far as to label the war a "[righteous endeavour](#)", while expressing the willingness to "stand with Russia against imperialism", it can be inferred that the Kim regime would be willing to ship a portion of its sizeable stockpile of Soviet arms including compatible artillery shells, short ranged unguided rockets and even mortar ammunition to the Russian army. Despite such munitions being of [dubious reliability and accuracy](#), due to excessively long storage, they do nonetheless help Putin prolong his "Special Military Operation" in Ukraine. As for what DPRK wants in return, such compensation is expected to be something which the North finds challenging to develop independently – satellite and satellite launching technology.

### **Help with Satellite and even Missile Technology**

In 1963, in the early years of the DPRK-USSR relationship, Moscow had [refused to help Pyongyang develop nuclear weapons](#), and declined the export of Scud ballistic missiles to the latter, leading to the Kim regime having to acquire [Scud missiles from Egypt](#) in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Hence, Moscow's policy of supporting North Korea entailed great reluctance in providing strategically influential technology.

However, on the occasion of the latest Kim visit, Putin responded in the affirmative when asked by a reporter whether Russia would help the DPRK build satellites. What was left unsaid is whether Pyongyang would also be given technology to reliably launch such payloads into orbit, but this is to be expected as it makes little sense to have functional satellites remain earthbound. From the perspective of North Korea's adversaries, such a drastic change in the Kremlin's policy to permit sensitive technological proliferation is hugely destabilising, as it gives the North a short cut to improved ICBM capabilities, since satellite launch vehicles and long-range missiles are very similar.

### **Pyongyang's Strengthened Dignity vis-à-vis Moscow**

During Kim's last summit with Putin in 2019, the focus was very much on the [denuclearisation of North Korea](#), with the latter playing the role of wise elder statesman, and the former seeking Putin's help as an intermediary with Washington. In short, Moscow held an elevated position of respect then vis-à-vis Pyongyang.

When Kim met Putin in Vostochny Cosmodrome, the influential dynamic had reversed to a significant extent. At a superficial level, it should be noted that [Kim kept Putin waiting for 30 minutes](#). Even though such disrespect was shown, Putin welcomed Kim warmly with deferential "red carpet treatment". More importantly, unlike 2019, denuclearisation was clearly not on the agenda, and any pretence that Kim was the junior partner in this diplomatic dyad was clearly done away with. Both parties have resources highly valued by the other and the power equation has equalised.

Moreover, even though the North Korean economy is decrepit and smaller than Russia's, while about 42 per cent of the North's population is [malnourished](#), Kim does not have to deal with a war against implacable Ukrainians who show no willingness to negotiate, and are supported by much of the Western aligned world, with financial aid and increasingly sophisticated military support. Crucially, Kim does not have to worry about the daily erosion of the Korean People's Army while Putin must surely be cognisant that more than a quarter million Russian soldiers have been [killed or wounded](#) since fighting began in late February 2022.

Additionally, Kim might feel more confident at this latest summit because he is more secure in his office than Putin. The DPRK is a totalitarian society with the Kim dynasty maintaining an iron grip on power, while Putin is simply the head of a strongly authoritarian government which recently weathered a munity by the late head of the Wagner mercenary company, Yevgeny Prigozhin.

### **Key Takeaways from this Kim-Putin Meeting**

From the changes seen in the dynamics of Pyongyang-Moscow diplomacy since 2019, it is obvious that the vicissitudes of international politics are many and varied. As a national leader, one might end up doing unexpected things, as seen in the stellar reception that Kim received in Eastern Russia, or the two summits that President Donald Trump had with Kim in 2018 and 2019, even though both leaders traded insults before them. Political analysts should thus exercise caution and not preclude any outcome, despite apparent improbability.

Next, the [oft-quoted saying](#) by Lord Palmerston, the British Prime Minister from 1855-1858 and 1859-1865, that "We have no eternal allies, and we have no perpetual enemies. Our interests are eternal and perpetual, and those interests it is our duty to follow." rings true today. When the Soviet Union withdrew material support for the DPRK during the dying days of the Cold War, Pyongyang reacted with hostility but now Kim and Putin appear to be the best of friends. Such examples of national interest driven state relationships abound throughout history.

The predicament that Putin is in, where Russia is limited to consorting with a small handful of other like-minded states, in order to source for war materiel, due to global condemnation of his ill-considered war in Ukraine, is a cautionary tale that wise prudence in foreign policy is paramount in statesmanship.

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