

Arbenita Sopaj, “In For the Long Haul: Kim’s Meeting with Putin Amid Ukraine War,” The Institute for Security and Development Policy, 16 October 2023.

The unexpected political developments in 2022 kept the world on edge due to Russia’s military buildup near the border with Ukraine, leaving nearly 500,000 people dead. It is evident that Russia’s reason behind the military attack, now a war, is highly strategic and goes beyond mere territorial ambitions. This is primarily because it revealed a larger narrative, a fierce resistance to NATO’s presence in the region. In fact, Russia’s animosity toward NATO has been around for some time, and this was demonstrated by its opposition to NATO’s involvement in Kosovo, Libya, and Afghanistan, to name just a few. However, this time, its apprehension centers on Ukraine, a country of territorial significance that, in Russia’s view, should refrain from seeking closer ties with NATO. Its opposition to Ukraine’s NATO membership has been unmistakable, as Putin stated: “...Ukraine’s NATO membership, we have repeatedly emphasized that it represents an evident threat to Russia’s security.” His reaffirmation has demonstrated that Russia’s objectives extend far beyond obtaining strategic territory. While some have viewed Russia’s aggression as an act of provocation against Western powers, on the flip side, Putin’s dire warnings about the potential catastrophe of a nuclear war provide a clear glimpse into Russia’s profound anxieties regarding the expansion of Western influence in its immediate vicinity. However, the question for concern is to what extent Putin is willing to resist surrender in the current circumstances. Russia’s Pursuit of Strategies to Resist Western Powers Continues As the conflict between Russia and Ukraine persists, Western powers have remained fully committed to implementing sanctions on the former while providing support to the latter in its fight for peace and security. Although Ukraine’s resistance has achieved a certain success in discouraging Russian aggression, the latter has not been left without the backing of its partners in this undertaking, namely North Korea and China. Their support for Russia has added another layer of complexity to the geopolitical shift. This implies that if the two continue to support Russia, it would necessitate countries not only from Europe and North America but also Asia to join their efforts to ensure peace and security. The perilous aspect of their assistance pertains not only to the provision of military gear but also to the support of personnel, as underscored by Bruce We. Bennett. This is a call for concern addressed by NATO allies since its primary focus is Europe, North America and, most recently, Asia. Nevertheless, as the geopolitical landscape has evolved, so too have the objectives of the alliance, which is regarded as the largest military organization devoted to security in regions of significance to Western allies, including that of Asia. This has prompted Western allies to embark on an extraordinary endeavor to address present-day challenges. As such, in May 2023, Japan consented to be host of the first NATO liaison office in Asia. The former’s willingness to welcome the liaison office was met with disapproval from neighboring countries, particularly China, who were concerned that the U.S. was drawing closer to their borders. It even prompted China’s Foreign Minister Wang Wenbin to call upon

Japan: “We urge Japan to draw lessons from history, stay committed to the path of peaceful development, and avoid doing things that could dismantle trust and affect peace and stability in this region.” While North Korea and China have not remained passive in response to regional developments, the understanding that NATO is extending its influence into Asia has spurred them to cultivate a stronger alliance with Russia. This became apparent in a turn of events in July 2023, when Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu paid a visit to North Korea, coinciding with the celebration of the 70th anniversary of the Korean War’s end. Shoigu’s visit is not very surprising, given the Soviet Union’s assistance to the country during the Korean War from 1950 to 1953. That being said, the attributes of their meeting, when considered in a historical context, are not groundbreaking, which enhances the attainment of their common objectives. This has enabled North Korea to be one of the few countries that have acknowledged the legitimacy of Russia’s annexation of Ukrainian territories. Therefore, Shoigu’s visit had a more significant purpose than mere commemoration. Its primary aim was to secure military support from North Korea in the fight against Ukraine. He presented a letter from Putin to Kim Jong Un, emphasizing the following: Strong support from the DPRK for the special military operation in Ukraine, [and] solidarity with Russia on key international issues further emphasize our common interest and determination to oppose the policy of the collective West, which prevents the establishment of a truly multipolar, just world order. Further, intelligence reports from South Korea released during Shoigu’s visit suggested that Russia, China, and North Korea should hold joint naval drills. A similar report was released by US intelligence agencies suggesting that an increasing number of Russian officials are involved in talks aimed at formalizing arms agreements between the two. While such agreements between Russia and North Korea may not be entirely novel for the U.S. since they have underscored that the DPRK has been supplying Russia with a “significant” quantity of artillery shells, causing concern within the international community.

Bilateral Diplomacy as Putin and Kim Jong Un Confer: While Putin’s future course of action in Ukraine and the region will hinge primarily on the response of the West, especially the U.S., he still did not miss the opportunity to assess the situation. Consequently, on September 13, Putin met with Kim Jong Un in Russia’s Far East, where both leaders expressed a mutual interest in seeking each other’s help. Russia, on the one hand, is looking for Kim’s support in matters related to warfare supplies. Whereas North Korea is seeking Russia’s expertise and technology to advance its satellite capabilities and develop nuclear-powered submarines. While such a commitment is difficult to secure, Kim did not fail to pledge “unconditional support” while endorsing Putin’s call for a “sacred fight” that safeguards Russia’s security interests. The extent of their dedication has made it clear that both countries are contemplating the possibility of conducting joint naval exercises with China on board. Their position raises concerns for regional security and goes against the UNSC resolution 71/258 that bans negotiations or involvement in any activities related to nuclear-capable missiles. Their emerging

cooperation reveals a new dynamic in international politics, primarily because it involves countries with different political systems, with one side seeking peace and security and the other pursuing oppositional results. Kim's ambition to establish a more robust relationship with Russia and China is grounded in historical settings, as they once played pivotal roles as the main sources of primary arms suppliers prior to the era of sanctions. However, the likelihood of isolated regimes arising has not gone unnoticed by Western powers, including the U.S. In a press briefing, the National Security Council spokesman John Kirby expressed the U.S. government's reservations about this collaboration. He has stated that the U.S. is prepared to impose sanctions should such a partnership materialize while calling on North Korea to honor its public commitment of not providing or selling arms to Russia. While it might be premature to forecast the comprehensive ramifications of major players on the global order, one certainty remains: Russia is deliberately challenging the current global order and international laws. Therefore, this is a clear indicator that, at this point and time, Putin does not seem to consider surrender as a viable choice at this moment. This is because Putin is cognizant of the fact that if he attempts to end the war in Ukraine, he will face a trial. Therefore, it should come as no surprise if he pursues ultimate victory, even if it entails negative consequences for him and his people in the long run, and that includes the potential use of nuclear weapons. If the trilateral partnership materializes among the three nations, the global order becomes even more volatile as all three possess nuclear arsenals and adhere to communist ideologies, factors that should prompt Western allies to take proactive measures.

Views expressed in this piece belong to Dr. Sopaj and not that of the Diplomatic Mission.