



# Delhi Policy Group

Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power



## EAST ASIA EXPLORER

### JUNE 2024

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Volume II, Issue 6



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### ABOUT US

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*The views expressed in this publication are those of the authors and should not be attributed to the Delhi Policy Group as an Institution.*

### Cover Image:

*Premier of the State Council Li Qiang co-chaired the 9th China-Australia Annual Leaders' Meeting with Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese at the Parliament House in Canberra on June 17, 2024. (Source: [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of China/Official Website](#))*

*Fumio Kishida, Prime Minister of Japan with Yoon Suk Yeol, President of the Republic of Korea, and Li Qiang, Premier of the People's Republic of China the Ninth Japan-China-ROK Trilateral Summit in Seoul on May 27, 2024. (Source: [Prime Minister's Office of Japan/Official Website](#))*

*Chairman of State Affairs of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea Kim Jong-un held a meeting with President of Russia Vladimir Putin in Pyongyang on June 19, 2024. (Source: [President of Russia](#))*

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## Contents

**As Li Qiang Visits Australia, Canberra Says It is in a 'Permanent Contest' with China in the Pacific**

Pradeep Taneja .....1

**Outcomes of the Ninth Japan-China-ROK Trilateral Summit**

Anshita Shukla..... 4

**"Friends of the North": The Deepening Strategic Relations between Russia and the DPRK**

Jayantika Rao T.V..... 10

**Thailand Seeks Membership of OECD and the BRICS**

Biren Nanda ..... 15

## As Li Qiang Visits Australia, Canberra Says It is in a 'Permanent Contest' with China in the Pacific

by

Pradeep Taneja

The second highest ranking Chinese leader, Premier Li Qiang, was on an official visit to Australia from 15 to 18 June. This was the first visit by a Chinese Premier to Australia since 2017. Earlier, in November 2023, Anthony Albanese became the first Australian Prime Minister to visit China in seven years. His predecessor, Scott Morrison, who led Australia from 2018 to 2022, never received an invitation to visit China as prime minister.

Australia was in the deep freeze with China since 2017, after the then PM Malcolm Turnbull blamed "disturbing reports about Chinese influence" for his decision to ban foreign political donations and legislate against foreign interference. Another reason for China's freezing out of Australia was the Australian government's decision in 2018 to ban the Chinese telecom equipment maker Huawei from supplying gear to Australia's 5G network. There was a brief thaw in 2019, but it did not last long. In April 2020, following the outbreak of Covid-19 and China's stonewalling of efforts to investigate the sources of the virus, Morrison further angered China when he [called for](#) the World Health Organisation to be given weapons inspector-like powers to investigate the origins of pandemics.

Sino-Australian relations were at their nadir under Morrison's leadership. Consequently, in the lead up to the May 2022 Australian parliamentary election, there were frequent [references to China and Xi Jinping](#) during the campaign. Anthony Albanese, whose Labor Party emerged victorious in that election, promised to take a more mature approach to relations with China while standing up for Australian values and interests. His visit to Beijing in November 2023 and the reciprocal visit by Li Qiang to Australia are part of what Albanese has called the "stabilisation" of bilateral relations.

Indeed, Mr Li declared upon his arrival in Adelaide from New Zealand that the relations between China and Australia were "back on track after a period of twists and turns" and he called for the two countries to "shelve" their differences. In Adelaide, his most high-profile engagement was a visit to the local zoo, where he [announced](#) that China would swap Wang Wang and Fu Ni, the two giant pandas China loaned to the Adelaide Zoo in 2009, with a new pair that may be more successful at breeding than the old pair who failed to

conceive. This widely anticipated move in China's panda diplomacy was greeted with cheers by the assembled dignitaries.

Mr Li's next stop was Canberra, where he was officially welcomed with a 19-gun salute. The discussions between the two leaders were described by both sides as "candid" and covered a lot of ground. In his remarks at the joint media event, Mr Albanese said, "Australia advocates that we should all work together to promote a regional balance where no country dominates and no country is dominated." He repeated the mantra that his government has adopted when talking about relations with China: "we will cooperate where we can, disagree where we must and engage in the national interest."

The Chinese Premier, on his part, announced that China will include Australia in its newly launched visa waiver programme for a select group of countries. The two countries will also provide each other's citizens five-year multiple entry visas for business, tourism and family visits. A number of agreements on trade (Australia and China already have a free trade agreement), education, climate mitigation and investment were signed. China had already removed restrictions on Australian wine and barley that it had imposed when bilateral relations began to deteriorate. China is yet to lift its ban on Australian rock lobsters, although Australia's trade minister says the ban is nearing an end. It was, therefore, not surprising that Mr Li was served lobsters during several of his meals in Australia to persuade him to lift the ban as soon as possible.

The two leaders also agreed to strengthen communication between the two militaries. However, given China's aggressive behaviour against the Philippines and other claimant states, and its hostile attitude to Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs) in the South China Sea by the United States and other allied naval and air forces, it is doubtful if improved communication between the Chinese and Australian militaries is going to make much difference to the rising tensions in the region.

Just last November, Australia expressed "serious concerns" with Chinese officials when Royal Australian Navy divers sustained minor injuries caused by sonar pulses from a People's Liberation Army Navy's destroyer in Japan's exclusive economic zone. The Australians were clearing fishing nets that had got entangled around the Australian warship HMAS Toowoomba's propellers. The Australian warship was enforcing United Nations sanctions in the region.

Even as Mr Li was visiting Australia, an ugly incident took place near the Second Thomas Shoal in the South China Sea on 17 June. A Filipino sailor was badly injured in this incident, in which a Chinese coast guard vessel rammed into the Philippines' resupply vessels. The Chief of Staff of the Philippines Armed Forces

General Romeo Brawner [accused](#) the Chinese Coast Guard of behaving “like pirates”. The incident prompted Mr Albanese to voice his concerns about the incident to Mr Li in private. Later, as the Chinese Premier was on his way to Malaysia, the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs issued a [statement](#) describing the incident as “deeply concerning”.

Mr Li’s final stop Down Under was Perth, the capital of Western Australia, which supplies the bulk of the iron ore Australia exports to China. He attended a Chinese community reception and interacted with mining magnates and other business leaders there. Mr Albanese joined him in some of his engagements in Perth. For some unknown reason, Mr Li did not visit Australia’s two largest cities – Sydney and Melbourne, both of which have large Chinese diaspora populations. The Chinese Premier left Perth for Kuala Lumpur, the final leg of his three-nation tour.

As Mr Li was being warmly welcomed by his Malaysian hosts, Australia’s Foreign Minister, Senator Penny Wong, was leading a high-power delegation of six Australian ministers to Papua New Guinea as part of a concerted push by Australia to counter Chinese influence in the Pacific through greater financial aid, frequent visits, more respectful treatment of the Pacific leaders, and enhanced security cooperation.

Before leaving for Port Moresby, the PNG capital, Senator Penny Wong [said](#) Australia was in “a state of permanent contest” with China in the Pacific, thus underlying the ongoing tension between Australia’s desire to improve relations with China while pushing back against its aggressive behaviour in the South China Sea and its growing influence in the South Pacific.

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## Outcomes of the Ninth Japan-China-ROK Trilateral Summit

by

Anshita Shukla

In a breakthrough meeting, the three key countries of East Asia – Japan, South Korea, and China – convened a trilateral summit drawing an end to a four-year-long hiatus. The three countries share strained bilateral relations, due to lingering grievances from a history of occupation and contesting ideologies and interests, which has inhibited trilateral cooperation rendering the continent unstable. As geopolitical tensions rise, the need to restart channels of dialogue and diplomacy is shared across the three countries.

The Ninth Trilateral Summit between China, Japan, and South Korea was convened in Seoul on May 27, 2024<sup>1</sup>. Chinese Premier Li Qiang, Japanese Prime Minister Kishida Fumio, and South Korean President Yoon Suk-Yeol resumed the highest-level annual meetings between their three countries for the first time in over four years. A joint declaration was issued, post-meeting, highlighting six priority areas of cooperation<sup>2</sup>-

- (i) People-to-People Exchanges
- (ii) Sustainable Development including through Climate Change Response
- (iii) Economic Cooperation and Trade
- (iv) Public Health and Ageing Society
- (v) Science and Technology Cooperation, Digital Transformation
- (vi) Disaster Relief and Safety.

In addition, the joint statement highlighted the intent of the three countries to institutionalize trilateral cooperation by holding regular Trilateral Summits and Ministerial meetings. The scope and participation of the meetings have been expanded through 'Trilateral + X Cooperation' to ensure that the benefits of the trilateral cooperation extend to other countries like Mongolia for reducing dust and sandstorms in East Asia.

In other areas of discussion, the divergence in interests and ideology between the three countries is evident. China is a close ally of Russia and North Korea,

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<sup>1</sup> "The Ninth Japan-China-ROK Trilateral Summit." n.d. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. [https://www.mofa.go.jp/a\\_o/rp/pageite\\_000001\\_00376.html](https://www.mofa.go.jp/a_o/rp/pageite_000001_00376.html).

<sup>2</sup> Yoon, Suk Yeol, Fumio Kishida, Republic of Korea, Japan, and People's Republic of China. 2024. "Joint Declaration of the Ninth ROK-Japan-China Trilateral Summit." <https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/100675321.pdf>.



the two countries viewed as drivers of regional and global instability by Japan and South Korea. On the issue of the China-Japan-South Korea Free Trade Agreement (FTA), the leaders have pledged to “speed up negotiations” for a “free, fair, comprehensive, high-quality, and mutually beneficial” FTA. However, given the US-driven efforts to de-risk supply chains and domestic pressures to reduce economic dependence on China the rationale for Japan and South Korea to pursue the negotiations is some-what far-fetched. The summit did not note any progress in the negotiations of the agreement. The Chinese Premier Li Qiang’s reduced power under President Xi Jinping<sup>3</sup> further reduced the symbolism of the meeting.

The mechanism of annual leaders’ level meetings between China, Japan, and South Korea was established in 2008. After the initial years of consecutive meetings, the dialogues were suspended in 2013, 2014, 2016 and 2017 due to political tensions between the countries. Restarted in 2018, the trilateral summits were paused again after two years in 2019 due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The meetings were unable to restart due to strained relations over long-standing wartime labour issues between Seoul and Tokyo and Beijing’s intensifying military activities in the East China Sea. Since its inception, the regularity of these leaders’ meetings has been contingent on the political climate of bilateral relations between the countries despite a dedicated trilateral secretariat tasked with facilitating the trilateral summit and other dialogue and cooperation programs<sup>4</sup>.

A key factor enabling the resumption of the trilateral summit this year is the recent rapprochement in bilateral relations between South Korea and Japan. The 2018 Supreme Court ruling in South Korea directing Japanese companies, Mitsubishi and Nippon Steel, to compensate wartime Korean workers for forced labour, has been a central point of contention<sup>5</sup>. In March 2023, the two countries struck a deal to resolve the issue of forced labourers enabling a series of diplomatic visits by the respective leaders of Japan and South Korea revitalising bilateral relations<sup>6</sup>. Japan removed export controls levied against

<sup>3</sup> Bloomberg.Com. 2023. “China’s New Premier Li Qiang Steps Into Role Stripped of Former Power,” March 8, 2023. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2023-03-08/china-s-new-premier-steps-into-role-stripped-of-its-former-power>.

<sup>4</sup> “Trilateral Cooperation Secretariat.” n.d. <https://www.tcs-asia.org/en/main/>.

<sup>5</sup> Denyer, Simon. 2018. “New South Korean Court Ruling Angers Japan, Deepening Crisis Between America’s Closest Pacific Allies.” Washington Post, November 29, 2018. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/s-korea-court-orders-japans-mitsubishi-to-pay-compensation-for-wartime-forced-labor/2018/11/28/4f0a6616-f37e-11e8-9240-e8028a62c722\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/s-korea-court-orders-japans-mitsubishi-to-pay-compensation-for-wartime-forced-labor/2018/11/28/4f0a6616-f37e-11e8-9240-e8028a62c722_story.html).

<sup>6</sup> Alexandre, Chelsie. 2023. “South Korea Announces Plan to Resolve Forced Labor Disputes With Japan.” The Diplomat, March 15, 2023. <https://thediplomat.com/2023/03/south-korea-announces-plan-to-resolve-forced-labor-disputes-with-japan/>.



South Korea on certain chemicals needed to produce semiconductors and South Korea withdrew its complaint filed against Tokyo at the World Trade Organization. The two countries have resumed a series of leader-level and ministerial-level meetings, defence exercises, economic engagement, and trilateral exchanges with the US.

The rapprochement between South Korea and Japan has strengthened the US alliance network in East Asia. The long-held differences between the two US allies had previously inhibited extensive military cooperation between Tokyo and Seoul and endangered critical supply chains. Since the rapprochement, the three countries – the US, Japan, and South Korea – have held regular meetings and increased the frequency of coordinated defence exercises. The most historic of these meetings was the Camp David Summit on August 18, 2023, where the leaders agreed on a “commitment to consult” to coordinate their responses to regional challenges threatening collective interests and instituted a three-way security hotline for effective crisis management<sup>7</sup>. The defence chiefs of the three countries held a Trilateral Ministerial Meeting (TMM) in Singapore on June 2, 2024, and announced that they will conduct the first iteration of a trilateral multidomain exercise called “Freedom Edge” and a trilateral tabletop exercise (TTX) in the following months<sup>8</sup>.

The second driver behind the reconvening of the trilateral summit in 2024 is the growing alignment between the US, Japan and South Korea. As the US-China strategic competition intensifies, the US has strengthened and revitalised its alliance network in Asia. This is a cause of concern for China. The US is tightening its chip export controls restricting China’s access to high-end chipmaking tools and technology<sup>9</sup>. Japan and South Korea are central in US efforts in de-risking the semiconductor supply chain from China through the Chip 4 alliance and the parallel restrictions on the export of advanced lithography equipment to China by Japan. These controls by US allies in Asia and Europe have impaired China’s advanced tech development efforts due to a lack of access to high-end U.S. semiconductor devices<sup>10</sup>. To counter

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<sup>7</sup> House, White. 2023. “The Spirit of Camp David: Joint Statement of Japan, the Republic of Korea, and the United States.” The White House. August 18, 2023. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/08/18/the-spirit-of-camp-david-joint-statement-of-japan-the-republic-of-korea-and-the-united-states/>.

<sup>8</sup> U.S. Department of Defense. n.d. “United States-Japan-Republic of Korea Trilateral Ministerial Meeting (.” <https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3793913/united-states-japan-republic-of-korea-trilateral-ministerial-meeting-tmm-joint/>.

<sup>9</sup> Choi, Soo-Hyang, and Yoshiaki Nohara. 2024. “China, Japan and South Korea Start First Summit Talks Since 2019.” Archive.Ph, May 27, 2024. <https://archive.ph/bG4ov>.

<sup>10</sup> Shivakumar, Sujai, Charles Wessner, and Thomas Howell. 2024. “Balancing the Ledger: Export Controls on U.S. Chip Technology to China.”

Washington's efforts, China must ensure that geopolitical tensions do not foreshadow its economic interest.

On the sidelines of the trilateral summit, Chinese Premier Li Qiang and South Korean President Yoon Suk-Yeol held a China-South Korea summit. The leaders agreed to establish the diplomatic security dialogue, a 2+2 dialogue consultative body between the foreign and defence ministries, the first meeting of which was convened on June 18<sup>11</sup>. The two countries also agreed to resume the second phase of negotiations for the bilateral FTA to boost service trade and investment, the first phase was held in December 2015. To facilitate this, a bilateral investment cooperation committee has been resumed after a 13-year break and a senior-level dialogue involving the two countries' trade ministries has been launched<sup>12</sup>.

These developments come at a time when China- South Korea relations have been strained. Under President Yoon Suk-Yeol, Seoul has strengthened its alliance with the United States by joining the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework and the "Chip 4" dialogue among semiconductor manufacturers. China has reacted strongly by opposing South Korea's growing alignment with the US and the rapprochement with Japan. Unlike his predecessor Moon Jae-in, the Yoon administration has been more vocal in its position on the Taiwan Strait. In an interview with Reuters, President Yoon remarked that the issue between China and Taiwan is a "global issue" and that he opposed attempts to change the status quo by force that has resulted in increased tensions around Taiwan<sup>13</sup>. The issue has been exacerbated by his remarks on the South China Sea<sup>14</sup> and his open criticism of China's relations with North Korea<sup>15</sup>.

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<https://www.csis.org/analysis/balancing-ledger-export-controls-us-chip-technology-china>.

<sup>11</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Korea. n.d. "Outcome of Korea-China Foreign Policy and Security Dialogue (June 18) View|Press Releases | Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Korea."

[https://www.mofa.go.kr/eng/brd/m\\_5676/view.do?seq=3226038&page=1](https://www.mofa.go.kr/eng/brd/m_5676/view.do?seq=3226038&page=1).

<sup>12</sup> Eun-Jung, Kim. 2024. "(LEAD) S. Korea, China Agree to Establish Diplomatic Security Dialogue." Yonhap News Agency, May 26, 2024.

<https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20240526003851315>.

<sup>13</sup> Reuters. 2023. "China Lodges Complaint Over South Korean President's 'erroneous' Taiwan Remarks." Reuters, April 23, 2023. <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/china-lodges-complaint-over-south-korean-presidents-erroneous-taiwan-remarks-2023-04-23/>.

<sup>14</sup> Choi, Soo-Hyang, and Cynthia Kim. 2023. "South Korea's Yoon Urges China to Do More to Address North Korea Threat." Reuters, September 7, 2023.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/skoreas-yoon-says-rules-based-order-crucial-south-china-sea-2023-09-07/>.

<sup>15</sup> Lee, Jeong-Ho. 2023. "South Korea Presses China to Address Kim Jong Un's North Korea Nuclear Threat." Bloomberg.Com, May 3, 2023.

The leaders of Japan and China, Premier Li Qiang and Prime Minister Kishida Fumio, also met on the sidelines of the trilateral summit for a bilateral meeting. During the discussions, they highlighted areas for potentially enhanced cooperation like “green economy, including environment and energy conservation, as well as medical care, nursing care and healthcare”<sup>16</sup>. Several points of contention between the two countries were highlighted during the meeting like export restrictions and visa waiver measures. PM Kishida raised concerns regarding China’s increased military activities near the Senkaku Islands and called for the immediate removal of the buoy installed in Japan’s EEZ. Other issues, such as the human rights issues in Hong Kong and Xinjiang, North Korea including the abductions issue, the Middle East, and Ukraine were also discussed. The two leaders agreed to accelerate consultations on the Advanced Liquid Processing System (ALPS) treated water from Japan’s Fukushima plant, a critical point of discord in bilateral relations recently.

Japan and China have historically not shared a close partnership. A history of imperial Japan’s occupation of China, a treaty ally of the United States, and the opposing territorial claims in the East China Sea plagued bilateral relations. The recent tensions in the partnership stems from Japan’s release of tritium-containing treated water from Tokyo Electric Power Company Holdings’ crippled Fukushima No. 1 nuclear power plant into the Pacific Ocean on August 24, 2023<sup>17</sup>. China, the largest importer of Japanese seafood and agricultural products, opposed the decision and suspended all imports of marine products from Japan<sup>18</sup>. The relations were further strained by territorial and airspace violations by China. From April to December 2023, Japan reported 392 instances of Chinese aircraft nearing Japanese airspace or Chinese ships encroaching into Japanese territorial waters<sup>19</sup>.

Despite geopolitical tensions plaguing bilateral relations, the resumption of the China-Japan-ROK Summits reflects a commitment by the three nations to

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<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2023-05-03/south-korea-presses-china-to-address-pyongyang-nuclear-threat>.

<sup>16</sup> “Japan-China Summit Meeting.” n.d. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. [https://www.mofa.go.jp/a\\_o/c\\_m1/cn/pageite\\_000001\\_00373.html](https://www.mofa.go.jp/a_o/c_m1/cn/pageite_000001_00373.html).

<sup>17</sup> Times, Japan. 2024. “Work to Improve Japan-China Relations Has Stalled.” The Japan Times, May 1, 2024. <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2024/05/01/japan/politics/efforts-to-improve-china-japan-ties-stalled/>.

<sup>18</sup> McCurry, Justin. 2023. “China Drastically Cuts Seafood Imports From Japan in Wake of Fukushima Water Release.” The Guardian, September 25, 2023. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/sep/25/china-drastically-cuts-seafood-imports-from-japan-in-wake-of-fukushima-water-release>.

<sup>19</sup> Taniguchi, Tomohiko. 2024. “Japan’s China Reckoning: Why Tokyo Must Strengthen Its Ties to Democratic Allies.” Foreign Affairs, April 17, 2024. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/japans-china-reckoning>.

maintain channels of dialogue and diplomacy. The outcomes of the summit hold a more symbolic value of signalling an intent to cooperate and not let cold war-like alignments from resurfacing. In areas of economic and defence cooperation, the scope for the three countries to deliver is constrained due to contrasting interests. However, in non-traditional security areas, the trilateral poses the potential to showcase the ability of Japan, China and South Korea to work together. For brokering any agreement with North Korea, the most destabilising element of East Asia, China's assistance and lead is crucial. However, the history of irregular meetings suggests a vulnerability of trilateral cooperation to political tensions in bilateral relations. It will be a test of time whether the three countries are able to set aside differences through regular dialogue and diplomacy to ensure regional stability.

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## “Friends of the North”: The Deepening Strategic Relations between Russia and the DPRK

by  
Jayantika Rao T.V.

Russian President Vladimir Putin’s visit to the Democratic People’s Republic of North Korea (DPRK or North Korea) from June 18 to 19 to meet with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un was characterised as a “friendly state visit.”<sup>20</sup> However, the visit heightened security tensions in an already agitated region. Putin’s visit was hardly unexpected, yet the outcomes of the visit will have long-term implications for the region. The security officials of South Korea, Japan and the Western countries have been thrown into a tailspin with Putin’s embrace of the North Korean leader. This is particularly significant as Russia is a permanent member of the UN Security Council, which is actively involved in containing North Korea’s missile and nuclear capabilities. Putin’s visit to North Korea, despite an arrest warrant issued by the International Criminal Court and his involvement in the Ukraine War, signalled his trust in the DPRK. In response, North Korea also went to great lengths to welcome Putin, adorning the country with his pictures and arranging for Kim Jong Un to meet him at the airport and accompany him throughout his visit. Pictures of Kim and Putin hugging to Kim taking Putin for a drive in the recently gifted Russian Aurus limousine created visual cues symbolising closer relations between the two countries in the future.<sup>21</sup> The message through the pictures with the focus on the gifts, despite the United Nations sanctions against them was a clear demonstration of the close bond between the two countries, which appeared to thumb their noses at the West’s sanctions that both leaders consider as illegal and unfair. The meeting between Kim and Putin was covered with a great deal of pomp and pageantry, portraying the two leaders as good friends whose unbreakable bond was formalised with a strategic treaty.

Putting the visuals aside, both leaders had an ulterior motive - the main event of the Summit was the signing of the wide-ranging treaty that included a defence pact. In Putin’s first visit to North Korea after 24 years (the last time was when the DPRK was under Kim’s father Kim Jung Il’s leadership), the leaders signed a ‘Treaty on a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership’. While official

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<sup>20</sup> “Russia-DPRK talks”. Kremlin. Accessed from, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/74330>

<sup>21</sup> Tanno, Sophie. “Putin And Kim Seen Laughing In Russian-Made Limousine After Inking Mutual Defense Pact”. CNN. (2024, June 20). Accessed from, <https://edition.cnn.com/2024/06/20/europe/putin-kim-north-korea-limousine-intl/index.html>

sources have not revealed the text of the treaty, a state-run news agency released a complete text.<sup>22</sup> Putin stated that “The comprehensive partnership agreement signed during the visit contemplates, among other things, mutual assistance in the event of aggression against one of the parties to this agreement.”<sup>23</sup> In essence, the signing of the treaty is essentially the reinstatement of North Korea’s 1961 Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance with the Soviet Union, which was replaced by a diluted version subsequent to the Putin-Kim Jung Il meeting in 2000. The newly signed treaty formally establishes their bilateral relationship on a strategic and enduring foundation. Including a mutual assistance pact conveys a message of collaborative deterrence aimed at dissuading countries from trying to isolate the DPRK and Russia.

### Relationship between Russia and North Korea

The relationship between North Korea and Russia has developed over many years to reach its current strategic stage, contrary to prevailing popular narratives. This relationship is intricate, multi-faceted, and extensive due to the geographical closeness of the two countries, which share a common border. World events have significantly influenced it. While Russia has seen changes in the leadership, North Korea has been ruled by the Kim dynasty throughout, with the memories of their experiences with the Kremlin shaping their relationship. Nonetheless, as the president of Russia since 1999, Vladimir Putin has also gained extensive experience in dealing with the Kims, including both Kim Jong Un and his father, Kim Jong Il. Despite common portrayals of the Russia-DPRK relationship as that of ‘old friends’, a more nuanced examination reveals the complexity of their interactions.

The first leader of North Korea – Kim Il Sung (the current leader of North Korea’s grandfather), first interacted with the Soviet Union during World War II, when his compatriots and Kim entered Soviet territory from their base in Manchuria to escape capture by Japanese police in 1941.<sup>24</sup> The Soviet authorities gave them refuge and inducted them into the Red Army organising them as the 88<sup>th</sup> Special Independent Ambush Brigade. Following the Japanese Force’s defeat in Korea, Captain Kim Il Sung was handpicked by the Soviet military command in Korea to lead the North Korean civilian administration. As such, Kim’s initial

<sup>22</sup> “Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Agreement between the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea and the Russian Federation”. KCNA. (2024, June 20). Accessed from, <http://kcna.kp/ru/article/q/848b072d48dcc965d89ce5f716e78e71.kcmsf>

<sup>23</sup> “Press statements following Russia-DPRK talks”. Kremlin. (2024, June 19). Accessed from, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/74334>

<sup>24</sup> Weathersby, Kathryn. “Dependence and Mistrust:: North Korea’s Relations with Moscow and the Evolution of Juche”. US - Korea Institute. (2008). Accessed from, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/resrep11127.pdf>



attitude towards the Soviet Union, especially towards Stalin was that of an obedient underling. Infact when the Soviet Union was on the brink of collapse, many observers argued that the regime would not survive without the Soviet's aid. However, what many did not realise was that by the 1970s, the relations between the two countries, while outwardly friendly, were not in reality what Moscow sought to portray, as Moscow did not treat Pyongyang as an ally and vice-versa.<sup>25</sup> The decisions that various Soviet leaders took led to the build-up of mistrust by the DPRK leadership. For example, while under Gorbachev, his "reformist" policies as viewed by Kim Il Sung, led to the rapid development of relations between the Soviet Union and North Korea's archrival - South Korea. This also created a need for Kim Il Sung to turn to a policy of 'Juche' described at length in an article published in the Rodong Sinmun of October 5, 1990.<sup>26</sup>

The disintegration of the Soviet Union was closely followed by the death of Kim Il Sung, installing new leaders, foreign policies and ideological stances. For many years, Russia followed a policy of equidistance, which meant that they engaged both North and South Korea.<sup>27</sup> Under Putin's leadership, Moscow's engagement aimed at tempering North Korea's problematic behaviour, especially its expanding missile program and nuclear testing, while also giving Pyongyang a stake in not alienating Russia or others through provocations. Upon assuming office, Putin reaffirmed Russia's position as a distinct geopolitical entity - an independent non-Western player, distancing itself from a unified Europe, and prioritizing the development of its own power and influence. However, even under Putin, it was clear that Seoul was a priority owing to its advanced economy. As such, on the issue of defence for Korea, Putin had a consistent policy of promoting a nuclear-free Korean Peninsula which led to its role in the 'Six-Party talks' that began in August 2003 and lasted till December 2008 when North Korea withdrew from the forum. It is noteworthy that Russia was the first to publicly suggest a six-party conference involving the two Koreas.<sup>28</sup> Russia's drawing of the "red-line" and "saber-rattling" often contributed to the re-convening of the six-party talks.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Snyder, Scott, and Kyung-Ae Park. *North Korea's Foreign Policy: The Kim Jong-un regime in a hostile world*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield. (2023).

<sup>26</sup> Dominguez, Roberto, Evgenii Gamerman, Sukhoon Hong, Alon Levkowitz, and Anand Rao. *Strategies of Survival: North Korean Foreign Policy Under Kim Jong-Un*. Rowman & Littlefield. (2023).

<sup>27</sup> Ibid

<sup>28</sup> Toloraya, Georgy. "The six party talks: A Russian perspective." *Asian Perspective* 32, no. 4 (2008): 45-69.

<sup>29</sup> Joo, Seung-Ho. "Russia's Role in the Six-Party Negotiations." *Pacific Focus* 19, no. 2 (2004): 107-140.



For many years, even after Kim Jong Il's death in 2011, Moscow did not initially change the Russian approach toward the Korean peninsula significantly. However, as Russia distanced itself from Europe and the United States, particularly after the Crimean crisis in 2014, its attitude towards North Korea also shifted slowly. Nevertheless, Russia's policy towards North Korea remained similar to that of the past decade. However, the narrative changed slowly with Russian Deputy Minister of Defence Alexander Fomin who while criticising North Korea for its increasing aggression still publicly blamed the US for aggravating the issue through its reactions during the 2017 Shangri-La Dialogue. Putin made clear to his audience that the Russian Government wouldn't recognise North Korea's nuclear status, but at the same time claimed that North Korea didn't have any other choice but to develop weapons of mass destruction in the interest of self-preservation.<sup>30</sup> Russia's foreign policy toward North Korea was often described as sometimes contradictory where, on the one hand, Russia wants to defend North Korea for the sake of Russia's interests in East Asia, and on the other, it condemns North Korea's choice to develop a nuclear program.

These contradictions in the cooperation between the two countries significantly changed after the Russian-Ukraine War. North Korea stood up for Russia at a time and in a way that its other allies did not. From the beginning, North Korea's reaction to the war was different from that of the rest of the world: it showed no immediate response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine and only breaking its silence a few days later identifying the root cause of the war as a one-sided expansion of NATO, which rightfully made Russia worry. North Korea's support for Russia was reflected in its voting pattern at the United Nations with being only 1 in 5 countries that voted against the General Assembly resolution condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine. In a display of reciprocity, Russia had supported North Korea's newly intensified missile launches since the beginning of 2022 (however, Russia still condemned North Korea's intercontinental missile tests). The increasing close cooperation between the two countries became especially evident with the Putin-Kim Summit 2023, which was closely followed by arms transfer and sensitive military intelligence transfer both ways. Pyongyang has become a key supplier of the much-needed ammunition with an estimated total of 6,700 containers of ammunition sent by sea and by railway since 2023.<sup>31</sup> On the other hand,

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<sup>30</sup> Westermann, Jacqueline "Putin and North Korea: Exploring Russian Interests Around the Peninsula". ASPI. (2018).

<sup>31</sup> Guido, Elena and Zhang, Eric Siyi. "Why North Korea's Military Partnership With Russia Is Here to Stay". The Diplomat. (June 21, 2024). Accessed from, <https://thediplomat.com/2024/06/why-north-koreas-military-partnership-with-russia-is-here-to-stay/>

Pyongyang had the opportunity to gain resources and achieve significant strategic advantages which have been reflected in its recent missile launches.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, while the summit's significance is extremely important, it should not be at the same time be overestimated owing to Russia and North Korea's past. Nevertheless, the new cooperation, particularly Article 4 of the treaty, is undeniably akin to a NATO-style alliance, stirring concerns about the deteriorating security environment in many countries. This directly impacts the peace and security of Europe, which numerous nations are working to safeguard. The potential technology transfer from Russia to Pyongyang is a significant concern in Asia, especially in Northeast Asia. The strategic implications of this alliance for Pyongyang and Moscow surpass a mere transactional quid-pro-quo. For Russia and North Korea, decreased reliance on China, which has been an economic lifeline during strict sanctions, could lead to significantly greater autonomy in their foreign and economic policies. This potential reduction in dependence on China could grant both countries greater freedom in their decision-making.

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## Thailand Seeks Membership of OECD and the BRICS

by  
Biren Nanda

The Thai Government announced on May 28, 2024, that it would soon apply to join the BRICS bloc<sup>32</sup>. If Thailand's application is approved by the grouping, Thailand will become the first ASEAN member of BRICS. A Thailand Government spokesman said joining the grouping will enhance Thailand's leading role among developing countries.

The announcement is significant because BRICS is often perceived as a "competing framework in an alternative international order led by developed countries such as the US and Europe". What adds salience to Thailand's application for joining the BRICS is the political color the grouping has acquired in the recent past with Russia and China driving the push for new members – UAE, Iran, Ethiopia, and Egypt. Some experts argue that "BRICS is kind of being turned into a ... geopolitical front against the West"<sup>33</sup>.

The BRICS has notable achievements to its credit including the establishment of the New Development Bank (NDB) and the Contingent Reserve Arrangement (CRA). The former provides financial support for development projects and the latter provides stability during financial crises. As these institutions grow, they could in time, aspire to rival Bretton Woods institutions like the IMF and the World Bank. That should be of concern to the West. The impetus for the establishment of these institutions owes itself in some measure, to the widespread disappointment at the failure to reform the governance of international financial institutions, in line with contemporary geopolitical and economic realities.

Thai Foreign Ministry spokesperson Nikorndej Balankura asserted in a written statement to the VOA that it was in Thailand's national interest to join BRICS.

"Thailand views that BRICS has an important role to play in strengthening the multilateral system and economic cooperation

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<sup>32</sup> Sukegawa Selya (June 20, 2025) Japan as a Bridge Between ASEAN and the OECD. The Diplomat.

<https://thediplomat.com/2024/06/japan-as-a-bridge-between-asean-and-the-oecd/#:~:text=Strengthening%20relations%20between%20the%20OECD,application%20for%20membership%20by%20Thailand.>

<sup>33</sup> Thitinan Pongsudhirak, a political science and international relations professor at Bangkok's Chulalongkorn University

between countries in the Global South, which aligns with our national interests. As for economic and political benefits, joining BRICS would reinforce Thailand's role on the global stage, and strengthen its international cooperation with emerging economies, especially in trade, investment, and food and energy security.”

Nikorndej emphasized Thailand’s desire to have good relations with all countries and envisioned a role for Thailand as a bridge builder, promoter of peace and a believer in shared benefits for all. Thailand sees itself as “a key global and regional player” and believes that the “BRICS will enhance Thailand’s voice in the global south”.

In keeping with its traditional policy of seeking to strike a balance between China and the United States, Thailand is also seeking to join the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)<sup>34</sup>. OECD is often referred to as the Development Countries’ Club.” Thailand aspires to be a developed country by 2037.

Thailand has been participating in deliberations of OECD bodies for over a decade<sup>35</sup>. The OECD and Thailand have been deliberating within the framework of three-year “Country Programs” since 2018. Thailand submitted a “Letter of Intent” to join the OECD in February 2024. Prommin Lertsuride, secretary–general to the Thai Prime Minister stated that the OECD membership would help elevate living standards in Thailand. The Thailand Development Research Institute has estimated that by joining OECD Thailand’s GDP would rise by 1.6%. However, before Thailand can join the OECD, it must ensure that its laws and regulations meet OECD standards. For Thailand, there will also be challenges on democratization, human rights, political pluralism, and a transparent judicial system. On June 18, 2024, the OECD announced that the OECD Council has decided to open discussions with Thailand – thereby making it the second accession Southeast Asian country in 2024<sup>36</sup>.

Thailand’s closer ties with China came about in the aftermath of the 2014 military coup<sup>37</sup> when Western nations criticized Thailand’s backsliding away

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<sup>34</sup> Kosuke Inoue (June 22, 2024) Thailand aims to become first Southeast Asian BRICS member. Nikkei Asia.

<https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/Thailand-aims-to-become-first-Southeast-Asian-BRICS-member>

<sup>35</sup> A Solid Partnership between Thailand and OECD.

<https://www.oecd.org/southeast-asia/countries/thailand/#:~:text=A%20solid%20partnership%20between%20Thailand,number%20of%20OECD%20legal%20instruments.>

<sup>36</sup> The first accession country was Indonesia.

<sup>37</sup> Pongphosoot Busbarat et al. (December 5 2023) How Has China’s Belt and Road Initiative

from democracy while China adhered to its policy of “non-interference” in Thailand’s internal affairs. In due course, Thailand became a significant recipient of BRI projects and loans. The most high-profile of these projects was the “Thai-Chinese” high-speed rail. However, there have been persistent reservations in Thailand about the financial viability of BRI projects and fears that BRI loans would lead Thailand into a debt trap. BRI projects like the high-speed rail have also been accompanied by environmental concerns. Despite these fears and reservations, BRI projects have helped cement Thailand’s ties with China.

Thailand is crafting a nuanced foreign policy response to increasing polarization in the geopolitical sphere. Its pursuit of BRICS membership emanates from a desire to assert its own identity in the search for a greater role in reforming the existing international order. On the other hand, Thailand has replied for membership of the OECD in order to reap maximum benefit from the existing Western-led international order. It sees no dichotomy in pursuing these two initiatives simultaneously. Indeed, Thailand is trying to leverage its ties with China as well as with the US and Europe to achieve success in its two initiatives. Like some other countries in Asia, Thailand seeks to find the middle ground in the contest between China and the United States in order to enlarge its strategic space for independent decision-making and to pursue its national interest.

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Impacted SoutheastAsian Countries? Carnegie Endowment.

<https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2023/12/how-has-chinas-belt-and-road-initiative-impacted-southeast-asian-countries?lang=en>



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