

**RUSSIA, CHINA AND NORTH KOREA:
ONGOING TRILATERAL ALIGNMENT
AND ITS PERSPECTIVES**

Andrey KOVSH

EAI Background Brief No. 1751

Date of Publication: 15 February 2024

Executive Summary

1. In 2023, Russia adopted a new Foreign Policy Concept that describes China as a “friendly sovereign global centre of power” in Eurasia. It aims to further strengthen partnership and strategic cooperation, and sees China as the key player and partner in the Asia-Pacific region and beyond.
2. Since the beginning of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, Russia has shown a growing interest in economic cooperation with China. Internationally isolated, Russia has practically no significant trade, investment and technological partner except China. However, after the COVID-19 pandemic, China’s economic growth has slowed down.
3. Russia’s bargaining power in negotiations with China is very far from ideal as Russia needs China much more than vice versa.
4. Xi’s visit to Moscow demonstrated his desire to present China as a great peacemaker rather than to accelerate cooperation with Russia beyond certain limits defined by Beijing.
5. Today, these limits are seen as military cooperation. While Moscow would like to present Beijing’s support to the Western world as Russia’s diplomatic supremacy over Western sanctions, Beijing is not ready to cross the line.
6. By enhancing economic cooperation China aims to reduce the influence of politics in bilateral ties, so long as this development does not lead to secondary sanctions against China. Moscow appears to have understood this.
7. Russia and China have made some preliminary agreements on energy trade expansion as emphasised by Putin in several interviews. The two have a distinct and coordinated roadmap for further bilateral economic cooperation with a clear understanding of specific fields to develop.

8. Russia-China relations in 2023 had strengthened. Russia's economic dependence on China is growing month by month. While Moscow has no other options, China needs an economic booster post-COVID. Russian energy resources and domestic market could provide this momentum. China is the beneficiary of the current situation that may lead to the deep stagnation of the Russian economy.
9. Since 2022, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK or North Korea) has been signalling to Russia that it is ready for closer cooperation. Its top officials would like to maximise the profits of rapprochement with Russia. Pyongyang is seizing the opportunity and playing the Russian card.
10. In 2023 two major events included Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu's visit to Pyongyang and Kim Jong Un's meeting with President Putin in Russia.
11. North Korea considers Russia as a heavy-weighted partner on the international arena. While it does not necessarily mean a pivot to Moscow, it highlights Kim's strong desire to divert from Chinese hegemony and his unwillingness to stay in subordinated vassal status with Beijing. Meanwhile, this raises the question of Kim's understanding of the level of Moscow's dependence on Beijing.