

Russian-Korean relations and Russia's "Turn to the East"

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Throughout Russian history, the state was building relations with both Western and Eastern parts of the world. However, the recent conflict in Ukraine has changed the situation significantly: Western part of the world and Europe imposed sanctions, which has triggered Russia to shift the policy to the Eastern part of the globe. This transformation of Russian interests is called Russia's "Turn to the East". This work will focus on the Russia-DPRK and Russia-ROK complex relations.

To begin with, in partnership with North Korea, Moscow not only protected and asserted its interests, but also acted as an assistant to DPRK's development, striving to exchange political and economic aid with the newly obtained political partner[6].

The ties were deepened after the Kim-Putin summit (June 2024), which proved to be strategically important for fostering the relationship between two states. It marked an alignment between the countries, stemming from the existing nations' mutual desire for military cooperation, and formalized this security-based relationship. The most crucial aspect of the signed 'Mutual Defence Pact', encompassed by the 'Treaty on Comprehensive Strategic Partnership', is the insurance of mutual aid in case of external threat. These agreements helped the two states to alleviate UN sanctions' pressure on their economies, and reinforce their positions in the region, helping counterbalance the USA's influence in the Asian region[2]. This summit vividly illustrated the recently chosen Russian foreign policy track.

The recently signed "Treaty on Comprehensive Strategic Partnership" itself can be considered a separate political event, having significantly enhanced military based collaboration. Seizing the benefits of the alliance, North Korea got the opportunity to fortify its defence capabilities, test its army and missiles in action⁶ while Russia gained a strategic partner, more than capable of physical support: supplies of equipment and weapons, and even troops[5]. Thus, the treaty signified a remarkable beginning of the successful alliance.

Finally, the newly formed close bond between Russia and DPRK ensures mutual economical advantages. Russia has become DPRK's essential supplier of natural resources, most notably oil, helping Korea mitigate the impact of Western sanctions. These shipments[4], sent regardless of the UN sanctions, Russia maintains as a payment for its Northern partner's support. Contemporarily, DPRK is the only country prohibited from buying oil on the open market in order to prevent North Korea's economy from further developing.

Russia's strategic pivot towards the East can be also exemplified by its efforts to maintain relations with South Korea. Specifically, the relationship between Russia and South Korea reflects a complex interplay of economic interests and geopolitical considerations, showcasing aspirations for cooperative engagement without a formal alliance.

Although lacking a formal political alliance, Russia and South Korea address mutual security concerns through diplomatic engagements. These engagements have been established during high-level meetings, such as President Vladimir Putin and President Moon Jae-in talks in 2018. DPRK's military support for Russia during the Ukraine conflict has raised alarms in South Korea yet this situation is not perceived as a radical shift in Russo-South Korean

relations[1]. They acknowledge the necessity of security cooperation, which is driven by their shared interests in regional stability, peace maintenance, and conflict prevention. Both nations remain committed to diplomatic dialogue and economic collaboration.

Russia and ROK maintain volumes of mutual trade, indicating their recognition of the importance of economic ties for national and regional stability. However, South Korea's alignment with Western sanctions against Russia in 2022 led to a decline in bilateral trade, particularly affecting the automobile sector[1]. Despite these sanctions and logistical challenges, South Korean companies have not completely exited the Russian market.

Recently, South Korea has taken steps to lift certain sanctions restrictions on the supply of medical equipment to Russia. It is reported that this adjustment to the export control system is "of a humanitarian nature and the likelihood of its use as a weapon is relatively small"[3]. Specifically, medical equipment from South Korea includes X-ray machines for diagnostics and equipment for creating X-ray images. Moreover, South Korea is interested in strengthening ties with Russia to enhance energy security and achieve carbon neutrality. Both countries are exploring collaborative Arctic projects in energy development, shipping routes, and scientific research.

In summary, Russia's "Turn to the East" has been significantly influenced by the conflict in Ukraine and subsequent Western sanctions. Russia's partnership with DPRK has deepened through military cooperation and mutual support, while its relations with ROK remain complex, balancing economic interests with geopolitical considerations. Despite challenges, these alliances reflect Russia's strategy to diversify its international partnerships and assert its influence in the Asia-Pacific region.

References

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