

# ISSUE BRIEF

## Executive Summary

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## The Current State of the Ukraine War and Developments in DPRK-Russia Relations

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There is a growing perception within Russia that the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula is an increasingly unrealistic goal. Although Russia continues to maintain a cautious stance on transferring nuclear warhead manufacturing technology to North Korea, cooperation between the two countries in conventional and strategic technology areas—including missiles, space, satellites, air defense systems, submarines, electronic warfare, and drones—is likely to expand further than in the past.

South Korea should pursue a dual strategy of management and preparedness: monitoring the trajectory of negotiations to end the war while maintaining strategic communication channels with Russia, and at the same time responding firmly and in principle to DPRK–Russia military cooperation and the security threats it poses. In addition, South Korea needs to pursue a pragmatic Russia policy that preserves the foundations for cooperation in areas such as energy, the Arctic, the Russian Far East, and logistics; prepares for the possibility of restoring South Korea–Russia relations, hereafter ROK–Russia relations, in the future; and maintains both international principles and strategic balance.

### Developments in the Ukraine War and Negotiations to End the War

Russia views the Ukraine War not merely as a regional war but as a structural turning point that accelerates the weakening of the U.S.-led unipolar order and the formation of a new multipolar international order. Through the war and negotiations to end it, Russia seeks to secure its stake in the Atlantic order while expanding non-Western-centered influence by strengthening ties with China, North Korea, Iran, and the Global South.

As of 2026, the war has moved beyond the mobile warfare that characterized its initial phase and has become entrenched as a prolonged war of attrition. Russia, while occupying approximately 20 percent of Ukrainian territory, continues to exert gradual pressure on key fronts such as Donbas and

Zaporizhzhia, while repeatedly attacking Ukraine's critical infrastructure—including energy, electricity, and heating facilities—using drones and missiles. In response, despite shortages of manpower, ammunition, and air-defense assets, Ukraine is maintaining its defensive lines while conducting localized counterattacks and long-range drone strikes against oil refineries and military infrastructure inside Russia.

As a result, the war has expanded beyond a simple confrontation along the front lines into a comprehensive competition over both sides' industrial production capacity, energy supply chains, and economic and social resilience. Although the prolonged war of attrition has increased the need for negotiations to end the war or establish a ceasefire, negotiations remain marked by both partial progress and structural deadlock. Russia's demands for recognition of occupied territories, the transfer of the entire Donbas region, opposition to Ukraine's NATO membership, and sanctions relief directly clash with Ukraine's demands for full territorial restoration and strong Western security guarantees.

Mediation by the Trump administration in the United States has provided momentum for negotiations, but disagreements over core issues remain substantial. Realistically, limited and phased agreements—such as a ceasefire, a freeze along the current front line, a halt to attacks on energy facilities, prisoner exchanges, and security guarantees for Black Sea shipping routes—are more likely to be discussed before any comprehensive peace agreement. Therefore, rather than a complete end to the Russia–Ukraine War in the near term, a managed stalemate is more likely to persist, and the war is expected to have long-term implications for the future international order and security environment.

## **Russia's Domestic Situation**

### *1. Changes in Russia's Power Elite and the Deepening of Authoritarianism*

Since the war, Russia's elite structure has been reorganized into a wartime mobilizational authoritarian system centered on the siloviki, with the influence of elites from the military, intelligence, and security agencies strengthened across the political, military, and economic spheres. Although the early stages of the war exposed the limitations of the siloviki—including intelligence failures, operational inefficiencies, and delayed responses to the Prigozhin rebellion—Putin used these failures not as grounds for fundamental reform, but as an opportunity to strengthen control through personnel reshuffles, purges, and power readjustments. At the same time, war veterans have been incorporated as a new loyal elite, technocrats have been reassigned as managers of the wartime economy, and business elites and oligarchs have been transformed from independent interest groups into state-dependent partners in the wartime economy amid state-led asset redistribution and the expansion of the defense industry. As a result, Russia's elite structure has been reorganized around state power and regime loyalty rather than pluralistic competition. In the short term, this has helped maintain the stability of Putin's regime and the war effort; in the long term, however, it is increasing structural risks, including intensified competition among power elites, policy inefficiency, weakened innovation capacity, and the growing rigidity of a state-led economic model.

## 2. *Russia's Economic Situation and the Normalization of War*

Since the war, Russia's economy has maintained a degree of external stability despite the dual shocks of sanctions and war, supported by energy exports, state intervention, and wartime spending. However, this stability is closer to managed instability based on short-term adaptation strategies rather than a sustainable growth model. After the contraction of the European market, Russia redirected its energy exports to China and India, but its profitability and stability have weakened due to discounted oil sales and the rising logistics costs associated with operating a shadow fleet to evade sanctions.

Fiscal pressure is also mounting as expanded war spending and declining energy revenues have contributed to growing deficits, a reduction in sovereign wealth fund assets, and pressure to raise taxes. Growth in 2023–2024 relied heavily on the defense industry and state-led investment, while the long-term foundations of growth have weakened due to declining private investment, lower productivity, widening technological gaps, and the contraction of civilian manufacturing. The labor market is also distorted: despite low unemployment, labor shortages caused by military mobilization and population outflows, rising wages, inflation, and high interest rates are increasing business costs and reducing consumers' real purchasing power. At the same time, Russian society has increasingly come to accept the war as a condition of everyday life rather than as an object of political judgment, creating a distinctive structure in which the war has become normalized while remaining depoliticized.

Ultimately, although Russia is holding out in the short term, it is moving toward structural weakening and a low-growth trajectory over the medium- to long-term. These economic vulnerabilities and the normalization of war are likely to bring significant changes to Russia's politics, economy, and society going forward.

## **The Structure of Russia's External Cooperation and Changes and Characteristics in DPRK–Russia Relations**

### 1. *Structural Changes in Russia's External Cooperation*

Russia's external cooperation structure has been reorganized since the outbreak of the war around sanctions evasion, the securing of alternative markets, and the strengthening of military cooperation in response to Western sanctions. It has shifted away from its previous focus on energy- and investment-centered economic cooperation and multilateral diplomacy, becoming a strategic instrument for regime survival and the conduct of the war instead. In particular, the importance of China, Iran, and North Korea has increased. China is Russia's core economic and trade partner, but the relationship has become increasingly asymmetric as Russia's dependence on China has grown. Iran has helped supplement Russia's warfighting capacity through drone and military-supply cooperation. North Korea, meanwhile, has emerged as the country whose relations with Russia have developed most rapidly since the

war began, forming a mutually complementary structure in which North Korea provides weapons and troops while Russia offers technological support and diplomatic protection.

Russia is also building alternative networks with non-Western and Global South countries to circumvent Western financial and technological sanctions. These networks go beyond the economic sphere and increasingly encompass military, diplomatic, and technological cooperation, taking on the character of solidarity among sanctioned states. However, the Russia–North Korea–China relationship is closer to a combination of separate bilateral relationships than a genuine trilateral alliance. Russia is expanding its strategic options by strengthening economic cooperation with China while deepening military cooperation with North Korea, which can also be interpreted as an attempt to reduce its dependence on China

Ultimately, the core features of Russia’s external cooperation can be summarized as de-Westernization, sanctions-evasion networks, and military-centered cooperation. These trends are likely to become important variables in the future reshaping of the international order.

## *2. Current Status and Development of Russia–North Korea Relations*

Since 2025, DPRK–Russia relations have deepened beyond the institutionalization of military, economic, and diplomatic cooperation, entering a stage directly linked to the conduct of war and regime management. Russia has supplemented its warfighting capacity in the prolonged Ukraine war by receiving artillery shells, missiles, troops, and labor from North Korea, while North Korea has secured food, energy, foreign currency, diplomatic protection, and the possibility of cooperation in advanced military technologies in return. In particular, following the signing of the Treaty on Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in 2024, bilateral relations have developed beyond simple cooperation into a de facto wartime alliance that shares combat experience, sacrifice, commemoration, and propaganda. Social exchanges in areas such as tourism, aviation, railways, education, culture, and sports have also expanded rapidly.

However, while Russia remains cautious about transferring core nuclear weapons technologies such as nuclear warhead design and fissile-material production, the possibility of cooperation in conventional and strategic technologies — including missiles, satellites, air defense systems, submarines, electronic warfare, and drones — has increased.

Ultimately, current DPRK–Russia relations function as a military, manpower, and diplomatic rear base for Russia’s prolonged war and as a key support network for North Korea’s regime survival and military buildup. At the same time, they are emerging as a symbolic example of anti-Western solidarity challenging the U.S.-led international order.

## **South Korea's Response**

DPRK–Russia relations have moved beyond limited cooperation in the past and are developing into a multifaceted and practical alliance that combines warfighting, military technology, economic exchange, and ideological solidarity. They are emerging as a new strategic axis linking security in Northeast Asia and Europe. This signifies the weakening of the UN sanctions regime against North Korea, the expansion of Korean Peninsula issues into Eurasian and European security concerns, and Russia's increasingly realist approach to the North Korean nuclear issue.

However, DPRK–Russia cooperation is not a fully equal alliance; it also has a transactional character based on mutual need. While Russia is strengthening its ties with North Korea, it does not appear to want a complete rupture in relations with South Korea. Therefore, South Korea needs to make Russia understand that if DPRK–Russia military cooperation threatens South Korea's security, it could also constrain the restoration of ROK–Russia relations and cooperation in the economy, energy, and Arctic shipping routes. At the same time, South Korea should maintain dialogue channels in areas outside the sanctions framework, such as academia, culture, climate, and logistics, to prevent Russian diplomacy from becoming locked into an exclusively North Korea-centered orientation.

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