

What North Korea Might Gain From Russia's Invasion Attempt

Benjamin Katzeff Silberstein
3 May 2022

Globally, few countries lost as much as North Korea from the Soviet Union's economic decline and ultimate implosion. Moscow subsidized the North Korean economy by exporting crucial goods such as oil and importing North Korean goods (often of low quality) at "friendship prices" highly beneficial to Pyongyang. When these subsidies ended, North Korea's planned economy broke down, resulting in a famine that killed between 600,000 and one million people. Since then, North Korea has continuously refused to overhaul its economic system. It trades almost exclusively with China, who routinely turns a blind eye to the international sanctions on the country.

But could all this change over the coming years? Russia's attempted invasion of Ukraine raises fundamental questions about the future of the international world order. It may be one where countries such as Russia and China increasingly coalesce in a sphere of their own with little or no consideration for international norms in the international community, much less United Nations sanctions regimes.

Such a development would be highly beneficial for North Korea. The international community has long sought to make Kim Jong-un choose between either nuclear weapons or economic development, sanctions relief and trade with the outside world. Should Russia and China move toward a geopolitical sphere with rules and norms entirely of their own, this dichotomy will no longer apply.

Perhaps the seeds for such a development already exist. In mid-March this year, Kazbek Taysaev, a State Duma Deputy from the Communist Party, said that "Russia should strengthen its integration with North Korea, and remove sanctions on it," advocating for more cooperation between the two countries. A few days later, on March 22nd, about a month after the invasion attempt began, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Igor Morgulov met with North Korea's ambassador to Russia and discussed "[...] issues of the development of bilateral relations in the context of changes taking place in the international arena, as well as topical regional problems, including the situation on the Korean Peninsula." This formulation suggests not only that Russia wants to draw North Korea closer, but also that Moscow may be prepared to give Pyongyang more backing in international diplomacy.

Moreover, North Korea was one of five member states that voted against the UN General Assembly resolution

demanding that Russia withdraw its forces from Ukraine. North Korea has been one of the most supportive international voices for Russia's invasion attempt. On April 25th, 2022, North Korea's state newspaper *Rodong Sinmun* highlighted strengthened cooperation and coordination between North Korea and Russia on global issues, stating that "[t]he mutual support on the international stage has become stronger than ever." The paper also said that North Korea is "...sending our full support and showing solidarity to the justified struggle of the Russian people to protect the autonomy and security of the country and to defend national interests," a tacit, if not overt, expression of support for Russia's invasion.

These strengthened ties go further back. In the spring of 2019, Kim Jong-un visited the Russian Far Eastern town of Vladivostok and met with President Putin. According to one Russian scholar, writing in 2016, "[...] the Russian leadership has made a political decision to expand economic cooperation with North Korea and stimulate Russia's business interests with the DPRK." In March 2014, Russia's Far Eastern Development Minister, Alexander Galushka, visited North Korea and proclaimed, with his North Korean counterpart, a goal to increase trade between the two countries by a factor of ten until 2020, a vision that never materialized but still sent a meaningful signal.

For North Korea, there is much to gain from a closer relationship with a Russia uninterested in even appearing as a responsible, cooperative partner in the international community. For long, although both Russia and China have worked to water down and weaken the underlying resolutions as much as possible, both countries have periodically enforced sanctions against North Korea, sometimes even seriously. They even voted for UN Security Council Resolution 2371 in 2017, following a North Korean test of an intercontinental ballistic missile, banning North Korean exports of key commodities such as coal and iron ore. At the same time, Russia has been lax in implementing other sanctions. In 2018, for example, Russia let in over 10,000 North Korean workers in despite UN sanctions banning member states from employing foreign North Korean labor. Current estimates hold that some 20,000 North Korean workers earn foreign currency in Russia, the majority of it for the North Korean regime. Recently, a Russian official in the border region with North Korea told Russian state media that North Korean workers could make up for the loss of migrant workers projected to leave amid the drastic fall of the ruble. At the same time, an association of construction companies in the same region called on North Korean workers to be let in, to "stimulate the labor market, at least in the Far East."

As it becomes less important for Russia and China to appear as responsible actors in the international system, both countries may all but ignore the sanctions regime on North Korea. The larger the club of "rogue" states grows, the easier it becomes to be a "rogue" state. Many news headlines have stated that Russia is "becoming more like North Korea" – that is, internationally isolated and closed off. But for the internationally isolated regimes themselves, another state to trade and cooperate with is a good thing. For North Korea, an increasingly isolated Russia might mean a trading partner, an investor, and a political ally.

This would not only improve North Korea's deeply troubled economic situation. It would also serve its broader strategic goals. China is often somewhat simplistically called an "ally" of North Korea, and China accounts for some 90% of North Korea's foreign trade. Pyongyang is heavily reliant on support from China, leaving it highly vulnerable to Chinese actions and policy changes. This has long been a headache of North Korea's leaders. In the 1990s, Kim Jong-il warned of the dangers of exporting large amounts of natural resources to one single country – precisely what North Korea does to China. Decreasing economic dependence on China by increasing trade specifically with Russia was one of the main goals in Kim Jong-un's first five-year plan (2016–2020). It is also a strategic goal that the regime has held for decades.

North Korea may have much to gain from Russia's increasing isolation, however harmful it may be to Russia itself. Increasing international polarization may not help North Korea come in from the cold, but it certainly makes the cold a less lonely place.



Benjamin Katzeff Silberstein

Benjamin Katzeff Silberstein is an Associate Research Fellow at the Asia Programme at the Swedish Institute of International Affairs. His research concludes North Korean society and security on the Korean peninsula.

About SCEEUS

The Stockholm Centre for Eastern European Studies (SCEEUS) at the Swedish Institute of International Affairs (UI) is an independent Centre, funded by the Swedish Government, established in 2021. The Centre conducts policy relevant analysis on Russia and Eastern Europe and serves as a platform and meeting place for national and international discussions and exchanges on Russia and Eastern Europe. Any views expressed in this publication are those of the author.

©2022 Stockholm Centre for Eastern European Studies

Previous publications:

Ending the Schwarzer Tango with Moscow: The Freedom Party of Austria and the Embrace of Neutralism by Anton Shekhovtsov

SCEEUS Guest Report No. 1 2022

Ukraine as Putin's Ideological Project by Martin Kragh

SCEEUS Commentary No. 8 2022

Reflections on Possible Russian-Ukrainian Agreements: Tragic Dilemmas and No Cause for Optimism War on Ukraine

SCEEUS Commentary No. 7 2022

Russia's War on Ukraine: Consequences for Georgia and Moldova by Jakob Hedenskog and John Zachau

SCEEUS Commentary No. 6 2022

Russia's Invasion of Ukraine by Jakob Hedenskog and Martin Kragh

SCEEUS Quick Comment, 11 March 2022

Some Preliminary Thoughts on the Policy Implications of the Russian Aggression by Fredrik Löjdquist

SCEEUS Commentary No. 5, 2022