Last September, Chairman Kim Jong-un traveled to Russia for meetings with President Vladimir Putin and other high-level officials. His ten-day trip was his first since the start of the coronavirus pandemic, and the longest since taking power in 2011. Although there were no formal agreements announced in the wake of Chairman Kim’s trip, his activities suggest North Korea and Russia hope to strengthen their bilateral relationship. This may raise obstacles to managing stability on the Korean Peninsula, raising the stakes for South Korea’s diplomatic initiatives with both the region and the international community.

Chairman Kim held several important meetings with high level officials and tours while in Russia. He met with President Putin shortly after his arrival, with North Korean state media reporting Chairman Kim saying that he believed his visit would “mark a significant occasion in raising the cooperative relations between the two countries to a new higher level.” KCNA further reported that the leaders discussed strengthening relations by exchanging high-level visits between North Korea and Russia. Chairman Kim also met with Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu, with KCNA reporting that the two officials discussed holding exchanges between their military personnel and other “practical issues arising in further strengthening the strategic and tactical coordination” between North Korea and Russia.

Like any tourist, Chairman Kim also made time in his schedule to take some tours of the local sights. The first was the Vostochny Cosmodrome, a Russian spaceport he toured with President Putin. KCNA reported that Chairman Kim viewed the construction of the complex and received a briefing on “the detailed technical features of Soyuz-2, Angara and other type carrier rockets and their assembling and launching processes.” Reuters quoted
Later, Chairman Kim toured the Komsomolsk-on-Amur Yuri Gagarin Aviation Plant. North Korean state media noted that the factory was established in 1934, and is a critical manufacturing facility for Russian airplanes. In addition to meeting workers at the plant, KCNA reported that Chairman Kim was briefed on the development of the Su-57, and also watched a demonstration of the fighter.

The American and South Korean governments have raised concerns over the growing confluence of Russia and North Korea in the wake of the Kim-putin summit. When asked about an unidentified Russian plane that stayed in North Korea for a few days, State Department Spokesman Matthew Miller said during a briefing that any transfer of military technology and weapons between North Korea and Russia "will further undermine the global nonproliferation regime and would be in violation of United Nations Security Council resolutions that Russia itself voted for." Previously in Seoul, Unification Minister Kim Yung-ho said he was "deeply concerned about military cooperation and arms transactions between the two nations," and called on them to "stop illegal and reckless acts that only deepen their own isolation, and abide by international norms, including the UN Security Council resolutions." The South Korean foreign ministry also lodged an official protest with the Russian ambassador, with Vice Foreign Minister Chang Ho-jin reminding Ambassador Andrey Kelik of Russia's obligations under international law, and that it should "immediately" end its efforts to deepen military relations with North Korea.

Based on Chairman Kim's trip, it is reasonable to expect to see further advances in North Korea's missile capabilities. Russia has long been a supporter of North Korea, and weapons development is no different. Experts say that rocket launch technology is extremely similar to ICBM technology. Open-source analysis by the Beyond Parallel initiative at the Center for Security and International Studies found that the summer North Korean missile test of a solid-state fuel ICBM had significant similarities with a Russian model. "This particular ICBM could not possibly have come into the hands of the North Koreans without the full support and cooperation of the Russian government," writes Theodore Postol, adding that its operation would require extensive training and support from Russia. North Korea and Russia have not issued a public agreement to cooperate on this kind of technology, and presidential spokesman Dmitry Peskov was quoted by Reuters saying that "cooperation in sensitive areas that should not become the subject of public disclosure and announcement." Although Moscow may not blatantly assist Pyongyang in its ICBM development, their actions suggest cooperation in information sharing may continue in a covert way.

One wildcard in the future of North Korea-Russia relations is China's response. When asked to comment on the Kim-putin summit, Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs Spokesperson Mao Ning said that it was "something between their two countries." Earlier in September, South Korean lawmakers cited intelligence officials that said DM Shoigu suggested trilateral Russia-China-North Korea military exercises during his summer visit to Pyongyang. While trilateral coordination between them would be a challenge to the United States and its ally South Korea, they do not seem to have achieved it. "The level of three-way cooperation among North Korea, China and Russia appears to be lousy," a senior Unification Ministry official told the Yonhap News Agency. "In a situation where China is not actively participating, it would be wrong to regard the three nations as one bloc." North Korea-Russia are pursuing a "partnership of the weak and the desperate," writes to Dr. Robert Kelly of Pusan National University. "So long as China...keeps its distance, an alignment of Russia and North Korea can only play the spoiler. It cannot radically alter world politics," he writes.
In the near term, there are some things the Yoon administration can do to deter North Korea. The Korea Herald recommended in an editorial that should Seoul should suggest to Washington “a revision of their bilateral atomic energy agreement in a bid to open the way for South Korea to potentially become a nuclear power.” While it may be too early for such a dramatic policy, underlining the strength of the U.S.-ROK alliance may be an easier lift. Dr. Michael Green of the U.S. Studies Centre at the University of Sydney points to the Camp David agreement, which calls for deeper military exercises and information sharing under the U.S.-Japan-Korea umbrella. He also suggests that the United States and South Korea should consider neutralizing future North Korean missile tests, either while in the air or on the launchpad. Bruce Klingner of the Heritage Foundation writes that the United States and other governments should continue to enforce UN sanctions limiting North Korea’s behavior. He writes that Russia and China are likely to block any new sanctions coming from the UN Security Council. But starting next year, both South Korea and Japan will be non-permanent members of the body. The United States and its allies should use it and other international fora to underline both the illegality of Russia’s conduct, as well as dissuade other actors, including China form abetting them.

South Korea should also rethink its reticence towards getting involved with Ukraine. Russia’s desperation to advance its war in Ukraine was likely one factor motivating President Putin’s decision to meet with Chairman Kim. “Stalin believed that the Soviet Union should prioritize events in Europe and not Asia; that focus has not changed,” writes Khang Vu of Boston College over at The Diplomat. This should encourage President Yoon Suk Yeol to provide greater support to Ukraine than it already has. “The fate of Ukraine and the Korean peninsula are inseparable,” writes Dr. Green, and that critics of the Biden administration’s support for Ukraine “fail to understand that appeasement in Europe begets aggression in Asia.”

An emboldened North Korea by Russia is a concerning development. The Korea JoongAng Daily published an editorial, noting the parallels between Kim Il Sung’s 1950 meeting with Joseph Stalin, precipitating the Korean War. “If Russia promises to hand over technology for advanced weaponry like ICBM and nuclear-fueled submarines,” the paper said, “it would be supplying weapons of mass destruction in utter defiance of the UN Security Council resolutions and a crime against humanity.” Seven decades since the signing of the Korean Armistice Agreement, the United States and South Korea should be vigilant in watching the development of North Korea-Russia ties to ensure that history does not repeat itself on the Korean Peninsula.

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