
AS CHINA-NORTH KOREA TIES COOL, RUSSIA LOOKS TO BENEFIT

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Moscow may be looking to take advantage of the nuclear standoff between Pyongyang and the international community. As cracks deepen in the decades-old friendship between China and North Korea amid increasing U.S. pressure, Russian President Vladimir Putin stands ready to fill Beijing's shoes.

"Russia (has) begun quietly laying the groundwork that would strengthen its ties to North Korea, thus increasing its global political leverage should it need it," analysts at political intelligence firm Stratfor explained in a May 5 report, referring to Putin's strained ties with the West.

This undated picture released from North Korea's official Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) on May 5, 2017 shows North Korean leader Kim Jong-Un inspecting the defence detachment on Jangjae Islet and the Hero Defence Detachment on Mu Islet.

Both countries share a long history of ideological and economic relations □ in 2014, Moscow wrote off 90 percent of Pyongyang's \$11 billion debt from the Soviet-era □ but recent projects indicate an even cozier relationship.

A new ferry service between Rajin and Vladivostok is due to begin on May 8 that's expected to carry up to 200 passengers and 1,000 ton of cargo six times a month. Meanwhile in April, Russian military hardware was seen transported to the country's border with North Korea but the Kremlin claimed the action was part of pre-planned military exercises, Reuters reported.

"There is little doubt that Russia is making sincere attempts at building a partnership with North Korea," Russia-Korea analyst Anthony Rinna said in an April 14 note published on the Institute of Asia and Pacific Studies at the University of Nottingham. "The idea that Russia is once again superseding China as North Korea's major international patron bodes well when viewed through the prism of North Korea's Cold War-era tactics of playing China and the USSR off of each other."

In March, officials also agreed to expand North Korean labor immigration to Russia. Tens of thousands North Koreans are believed to be living in the Eurasian country, many of whom are forced laborers sent to bring in overseas revenue for Kim Jong-un's regime, according to human rights groups.

Meanwhile, executives from state-owned Russian Railways visited the pariah state in January to propose enhancing railroad cooperation, which includes a railway from Rajin to Khasan and a program to train North Korean students at Russian universities.

Moreover, "when China recently threatened to cut off fuel exports to North Korea if it conducted its

sixth nuclear weapons test, Russia hinted it could replace at least some of that supply," Stratfor's report said.

Moscow's potential influence on the North Korean situation could give Putin a certain degree of leverage in the West as he deals with accusations of Russian meddling in the U.S. election as well as his country's role in the Syria and Ukraine conflicts, Stratfor explained.

"Though Russia alone cannot solve the North Korean problem, it could move the dial just enough to either play spoiler or ally to any efforts by the West to solve it."

Putin's strengthened bilateral relationship with Kim Jong-un comes as Beijing, North Korea's largest trading partner and chief benefactor, takes a harsher stance against its ally in compliance with President Donald Trump's requests □ Washington wants China to help cease Kim's development of intercontinental ballistic missiles.

And in response to Beijing's toughened attitude, which includes a suspension of North Korean coal imports, Pyongyang state media has accused Chinese politicians of outright "betrayal."

In a sign of the changing geopolitical dynamics, Russia topped the rogue nation's list of friendly countries this year, with China in second place.

While Russia can never entirely replace China's influence over North Korea, it could interfere with measures employed by China, the U.S. or their allies to try to pressure Pyongyang, Stratfor continued.

"It is in Russia's interests to maintain North Korea as a buffer state between it and Western-allied South Korea and Japan."

Political leverage aside, there are other reasons driving Putin's interest in the isolated nation.

"Russia's main purpose in its ties with the DPRK are driven more by a Russian desire to develop and securitize its Far Eastern regions," noted Rinna. "Russia values its geographic access to North Korea as a way to reach broader global markets."

In the past, Putin's administration has criticized North Korea's nuclear weapons program and participated in 2014 sanctions but it's not clear if Moscow will continue down that path.

"As with the rest of the world, North Korea's nuclear proliferation concerns Russia, particularly since the North's nuclear weapons test site sits just 200 miles from Vladivostok," Stratfor explained.

Kaynak/Source: