
THE CHINA-RUSSIA SUMMIT WILL FOCUS ON NORTH KOREA □ BUT IT'S REALLY ABOUT WESTERN INFLUENCE IN THE REGION

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Recent US rhetoric has given Beijing heightened concerns that Washington might now be thinking, much more seriously, about a pre-emptive strike on Pyongyangs nuclear capabilities

Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi makes an official visit to Russia on Thursday and Friday for meetings with key officials, including his counterpart Sergey Lavrov. The timing, which coincides with the Nato and G7 summits of Western powers, underlines that Beijing and Moscow have an alternative cooperation agenda on multiple issues, including the Korean nuclear stand-off and the Syrian conflict.

While Korea tensions will probably top the agenda, the two countries also enjoy an extensive bilateral economic dialogue which has warmed, in certain areas, since the crisis in Ukraine which has seen Russias suspension from the G8 (now the G7 in Moscows absence). In the period following the escalation of those tensions, Russia has, for instance, announced plans for a number of cooperation projects with China including a new method of inter-bank transfers, and a joint credit agency that seeks to create a shared financial and economic infrastructure that will allow them to function independently of Western-dominated financial institutions.

China and Russia are also among the states involved in creating alternative fora to the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, including the New Development Bank (NDB). This will finance infrastructure and other projects in the BRICS states, and a related \$100bn (£77bn) special currency reserve fund.

While the warming in ties since the Ukraine crisis can be overstated, with little substantial progress made to date on the array of economic and financial projects that have been announced with considerable fanfare, the boost to the bilateral cooperation agenda has helped enable the two countries to work towards stronger, common positions on key regional and global issues. A good example is the vexed topic of North Korea nuclear tensions, which is likely to top the agenda.

Both China and Russia are well aware that security problems on the Korean peninsula have no easy resolution. And both are grappling with how best to respond, not just to the regular missile launches by Pyongyang, but also to its nuclear tests of which the next one could come soon.

Recent US rhetoric has given Beijing, in particular, heightened concerns that Washington might now be thinking, much more seriously, about a pre-emptive strike on Pyongyang's nuclear capabilities. Several weeks ago, for instance, US President Donald Trump made clear – prior to his meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping in Florida – that if Beijing is not going to solve North Korea, we [the United States] will.

Moreover, after the session with Xi, Trump sent the USS Carl Vinson aircraft carrier to waters near North Korea. This ups the ante further from US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson's striking announcement on his Asia trip earlier this year that the two decades long US policy of strategic patience towards Pyongyang is now over and all options are on the table.

High possibility of war with North Korea, warns new South Korean president

The rise in US rhetoric is one reason why Wang Li asserted last month that China's priority now is to flash the red light and apply the break to both [the US and North Korean] trains to avoid a collision. Both Beijing and Moscow are concerned that the tensions on the peninsula could spiral out of control and have supported a UN Security Council initiative that would build on the UN vote last year to tighten some sanctions in response to Pyongyang's fifth nuclear test.

The UN measure favoured by Beijing and Moscow would require the US and South Korea halt military drills and deployment of the controversial Terminal High Altitude Area Defense missile system (THAAD) in South Korea. China vehemently opposes THAAD, which it fears could be used for US espionage on its activities, as much as for targeting North Korean missiles.

Russia shares this concern and Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Gennady Gatilov said in April that THAAD is a destabilising factor asserting that it is in line with the vicious logic of creating a global missile shield. He also warned that it undermines the existing military balance in the region.

The UN initiative favoured by Moscow and Beijing would also put further pressure on North Korea to stop its missile and nuclear testing. It is feared that Pyongyang may be preparing for a new nuclear test, and the regime last month celebrated the 105th anniversary of the birth of its founder with a huge military parade which unveiled what appear to be new inter-continental ballistic missiles.

However, unlike the US, China has been reluctant to take more comprehensive, sweeping measures against its erstwhile ally. The key reason why Beijing has differed with Washington over the scope and severity of actions against Pyongyang largely reflects the fact that it does not want to push the regime so hard that it becomes significantly destabilised.

From the vantage point of Chinese officials, this risks North Korea behaving even more unpredictably, and/or outside possibility of the implosion of the regime which would not be in Beijing's interests. This is not least as it could lead to instability on the North Korea-China border, and ultimately the potential emergence of a pro-US successor nation.

Taken overall, the Russian-Chinese dialogue comes at a symbolic moment given that the G7 and Nato will be meeting at the same time. While the warming of bilateral ties should not be overstated, it highlights the growing willingness of both sides to develop a significant cooperation agenda on certain bilateral and multilateral issues, including Korea.

Kaynak/Source: