



04/24

01 February 2024

### NEW E(MERGING) ALIGNMENTS IN EAST ASIA AND IMPLICATIONS FOR INDIA: MOVING TOWARDS A POINT OF NO RETURN?

**Abhishek Sharma**

*Research Associate, Centre for Air Power Studies*



North Korean Foreign Minister's recent visit to Moscow has generated much interest in the future of new alignments emerging in East Asia. The meeting was likely in the preparation of President Putin's visit to North Korea this year. However, to understand these new relations, it is vital to look at the broader East Asian region and the emerging power dynamics, North Korea's emerging role as a spoiler and Russia's assertive regional approach point towards a new engagement template. These alignments taking shape, although they are not unprecedented, point towards a direction where contestation is highly likely to take over cooperation. Two groups emerging in the new regional contestation, one led by China, which includes Russia and North Korea, and the other led by the US with Japan and South Korea, pose a challenge to Indo-Pacific security. The article analyses the shifting geopolitical alignments in East Asia, focusing on the role of Moscow and North Korea and its implications for India.

#### **Moscow and Pyongyang's role in East Asian geopolitics: Going back to the Cold War era?**

With China's rise, we are again seeing a new era of the Cold War in East Asia between two blocks: the US, Japan, and South Korea on one side, and China, Russia, and North Korea on the other. Although triggered by multiple factors, the final nail in the coffin was the institutionalisation of the US-led trilateral at Camp David last year.<sup>1</sup>

This New Cold War has further strengthened the Chinese urge to form a vital block in the East Asian region on the lines of the original communist bloc. In the current format, this anti-West block is less driven by ideological anti-capitalistic moorings

but more motivated by their converging interests that aim to counter the emerging US alliance in the region. Beijing has not gone overboard with the idea and is still carefully contemplating the best strategy for the region. However, Russia seems to be leading the efforts in the region, intending to forge closer ties with North Korea. This endeavour is likely to have the full support of China, which sees this as a way to limit the US allies—Japan's and South Korea's military aspirations. China's broad objective is to ensure that the US does not dominate the East Asian region, which is linked to its broader aim to dominate the Indo-Pacific. Hence, any effort by its friends (Moscow and Pyongyang) would be acceptable to Beijing if it curtails US engagement in the region and ties its hands in other parts, keeping Beijing's hands clean from being outrightly associated with the two neighbours. The hesitation is linked to the repercussions on its economic interests in the EU, which is more sensitive to supporting Russia and North Korea. However, Moscow has disregarded any criticism.

**Increasing exchange of military equipment and strategic technologies between Russia and North Korea signifies tactical cooperation. Moscow has been accused of the proliferation of technology to North Korea in violation of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolution.**

This increasing exchange of military equipment and strategic technologies between Russia and North Korea signifies tactical cooperation. Moscow has been accused of the proliferation of technology to North Korea in violation of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolution. In November 2023, South Korea accused Russia of sending military technology to North Korea that enabled it to launch a spy satellite successfully.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, North Korea has also been accused of sending weapons to Russia, which were used against Ukraine.<sup>3</sup> The recent visit of the North Korean Foreign Minister to Moscow signals that the ties will only strengthen in the coming times. In the meeting between Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and North Korean Foreign Minister Choe Son Hui, both sides had an 'in-depth exchange of views on intensifying the joint action over the regional and international issues, including the situation in the Korean peninsula and Northeast Asia.'<sup>4</sup> Moreover, while meeting with the Russian President, the KCNA statement read that they agreed to 'usher in a new heyday of the strategic and traditional DPRK-Russia relations of friendship' to 'keep pace with each other' to ensure 'regional and global peace and stability.'<sup>5</sup> This is a strategic move by Russia in Northeast Asia before his visit to North Korea this year, reciprocating Kim Jong Un's September visit last year.

### **What's Likely on the Agenda of the Upcoming Visit?**

In the upcoming visit, Pyongyang is planning to settle the issue of its nuclear status and re-unification goal, which are the Kim dynasty's core objectives. Traditionally, the Korean peninsula denuclearisation negotiation has been mired in uncertainty, with

Putin's Pyongyang visit, it hopes to put the nuclear question in deep freeze, if not settling it permanently. Some actions have already been taken in this direction. Last year, for the first time, North Korea promulgated a law in its National Assembly that legally establishes it as a nuclear power and puts an end to any probability of discussion on negotiations.<sup>6</sup> Kim Jong Un realises that this is the best geopolitical opportunity to consolidate its status as a nuclear power and will likely use this maximalist position in future negotiations with the incoming US president. Similarly, cutting off any remote possibility of reunification has also prevented South Korea from being part of any future nuclear negotiations, signalling no will to engage further. Lately, Kim Jong Un has expressed his intention clearly by shutting down three unification organisations and asking to amend its constitution, calling South Korea a 'primary foe and invariable principal enemy.'

**The Korean peninsula denuclearisation negotiation has been mired in uncertainty, with Putin's Pyongyang visit, it hopes to put the nuclear question in deep freeze, if not settling it permanently.**

In both situations, US domestic elections will be crucial in shaping East Asian geopolitics and deciding which direction the US alliance will go next year. With rising nationalism, US isolationism is expected to gain more momentum if things go as they are. The world saw a glimpse of this under the first administration of Trump, and it is again moving in that direction with the latest win of Trump in the Iowa caucus. He has expressed his views on easing relations with Russia and China during his winning speech.<sup>7</sup>

With the changing geopolitical tides in the world, both countries recognise the importance of strategic cooperation. Factors such as increasing adversity from the international community, the need for military-grade technology and equipment, and US-China rivalry drive this relation. For both Moscow and Pyongyang, maintaining regional peace and stability means protecting their interests; for that, the US needs to be kept out of the region, and the trilateral alliance needs to be either countered or stopped from succeeding. The Nuclear issue will likely give fuel to the conservative domestic constituency in South Korea, a vocal proponent of possessing nuclear weapons. That would put the alliance at risk.

Russia and North Korea will likely elevate their relations during the upcoming visit. If that happens, it will change the power dynamics of East Asia, placing it at the centre of great power politics in the Indo-Pacific, similar to Eastern Europe in Europe. Russia sees the current opportunity to elevate its relations with North Korea for its benefit before the US elections, so the next president will have less room to manoeuvre with

**Russia sees the current opportunity to elevate its relations with North Korea for its benefit before the US elections, so the next president will have less room to manoeuvre with Moscow and Pyongyang.**

Moscow and Pyongyang. The recent statement by Sergei Lavrov solidifies this point, and he said that 'we no longer trust the West.'<sup>8</sup> Even in the UNSC, Russia has become the de facto defender of North Korean actions.<sup>9</sup> It understands the necessity to support China, ensuring that the US fails to mobilise its alliance in the region, as opposed to what happened in Eastern Europe with NATO. Overall, North Korea will likely end up enjoying the fruits of Russia and China's deteriorating relations with the West, and South Korea and Japan will end up on the bad end of the deal as they will have to compromise with North Korea's Nuclear status.

### **North Korea's Emerging Role as a Spoiler Augmenting Beijing's Rise**

North Korea is in the game for a different reason: it sees the rise of China as an essential guarantee for domestic stability linked to the continuation of Kim's regime. In addition, with the Ukraine war, Pyongyang has again gained priority in Beijing's and Moscow's strategic calculations to keep the US, South Korea, and Japan in check. However, the big picture is that all the convergences are directed to weaken the US alliance in the region, and all countries in the anti-US camp have a role to play. North Korea keeps the US on its toes with its nuclear and ballistic weapons program, Russia is keeping the US engaged in European affairs, and China is increasingly consolidating power in the region. Chinese actions in the East Asian region have been particularly quite belligerent and have systematically attempted to erode the rules-based international order. Beijing uses grey zone tactics in the maritime domain, asserting its sovereignty through low-threshold military means by employing its coast guards.<sup>10</sup> China and Russia have also regularly violated the South Korea Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ).<sup>11</sup>

Considering this situation, it is expected that the emerging informal partnership between the three would pose an increasing challenge for the US and its allies. This will also have direct and indirect consequences on the security of the Indo-Pacific. The US and its allies will be more occupied in East Asia and less focused on another part of the region. This will seriously harm its status and may push countries to adopt external balancing approaches such as bandwagoning, hedging, or balance between the two blocks. For India, this will have profound implications. With a more active militarised East Asia, the US will focus less on the other sub-regions, such as the Indian Ocean region (IOR) or the South China Sea (SCS), essentially giving Beijing more open space to exercise its writ and engage in low threshold tactics of warfare both covertly and overtly. As the US and its allies get more tied down to some regions, Beijing will have the opportunity to engage more proactively in India's neighbourhood, undermining its interests. In the Indo-Pacific era, minilateralism is the key to ensuring stability and security, and the new emerging alliance's objective is to generate conditions that erode these foundations.

## India must Step Up: Strengthen Relations with East Asian Countries

India has close economic, trade, and political relations with Japan and South Korea and is an essential source of foreign investment and strategic technologies. Besides, it has also built close security ties in the last decade. Any increasing instability in the region directly affects India's interests. Attempts to weaken the 'like-minded' forces that share principles such as rules-based international order and regional interests should concern India. Hence, to ensure the region remains stable, India needs to work

**More synergy is required between India's Act East Policy, South Korea's Indo-Pacific strategy, and Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific vision to forge stronger military ties for security and stability. India must work with Japan, South Korea, and Russia to ensure that no country violates UNSC resolutions.**

with East Asian countries and regional institutions like Quad and ASEAN on the East Asia agenda. More synergy is required between India's Act East Policy, South Korea's Indo-Pacific strategy, and Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific vision to forge stronger military ties for security and stability. India should collaborate in the maritime domain as a priority through closer cooperation between regional navies and the coast guards. Maritime exercises and joint coordinated patrols must be undertaken more frequently in the region operating as an integrated force. The Sea Dragon 2024 exercise in Guam, which has coordinated anti-submarine warfare over the years, helps develop better interoperability, coordination, and honing skills with shared mutual expertise and best practices.<sup>12</sup> The first maritime joint exercise in SCS with ASEAN members was the first step that signalled India's intention to be a major player in the region.<sup>13</sup> Contributing to regional security and stability is in India's interest, particularly with its East Asian partners, Japan and South Korea. Although India's foremost commitment is to the IOR, the SCS, the Yellow Sea, and the Sea of Japan are vital to protecting its economic interest. The second priority for cooperation is the North Korean nuclear proliferation challenge. India must work with Japan, South Korea, and Russia to ensure that no country violates UNSC resolutions. The concern was stated in Quad's Foreign Ministers Joint statement that stressed the importance of 'proliferation of missile and nuclear technologies in the region and beyond' and urged 'all UN Member States to abide by the related UNSCRs including the prohibition on the transfer to North Korea or procurement from North Korea of all arms and related materiel.'<sup>14</sup> India sees this impacting regional as well as its national security. Going forward, we may see a new emerging architecture where regional powers will have to cooperate more closely, and India must take that opportunity to forge a more extensive network of like-minded countries to reiterate the adherence to rules-based international order.

## Notes:

- <sup>1</sup> The White House, “The Spirit of Camp David: Joint Statement of Japan, the Republic of Korea, and the United States,” August 18, 2023, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/08/18/the-spirit-of-camp-david-joint-statement-of-japan-the-republic-of-korea-and-the-united-states/>. Accessed on January 16, 2024.
- <sup>2</sup> Kim Hyung-Jin, “South Korea says Russian support likely enabled North Korea to successfully launch a spy satellite,” *Associated Press*, November 23, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/north-korea-spy-satellite-russia-assistance-6461d7216fa5bd3fa0945efeb06530c6#>. Accessed on January 16, 2024
- <sup>3</sup> Kim Seung-yeon, “S.Korean, U.S. nuclear envoys condemn N.Korea’s belligerent rhetoric, provocative acts,” *Yonhap News Agency*, January 18, 2023, <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20240118000652315>. Accessed on January 16, 2024
- <sup>4</sup> “Talks Held between Foreign Ministers of DPRK and Russian Federation,” *Korean Central News Agency*, January 17, 2024, <http://www.kcna.kp/en/article/q/4efd76f6433e85bbc0d4d92862d24ff4.kcmsf>. Accessed on January 16, 2024.
- <sup>5</sup> “DPRK Foreign Minister Meets Russian President,” *Korean Central News Agency*, January 17, 2024, <http://www.kcna.kp/en/article/q/7c108d980d3cc83a5a0fb8e10b4fbf48.kcmsf>. Accessed on January 16, 2024.
- <sup>6</sup> Jessie Yeung, “North Korea amends constitutions to bolster nuclear power status calls US and allies ‘worst threat’,” *CNN*, September 28, 2023, <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/09/27/asia/north-korea-nuclear-law-constitution-intl-hnk/index.html>. Accessed on January 16, 2024
- <sup>7</sup> “Donald Trump Election Campaign Rally in Sioux Centre, Iowa Transcript,” January 8, 2023, Rev, <https://www.rev.com/blog/transcripts/donald-trump-election-campaign-rally-in-sioux-center-iowa-transcript>. Accessed on January 16, 2024.
- <sup>8</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, “Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov’s statement and answers to media questions during a news conference on Russia’s foreign policy performance in 2023,” January 18, 2024, [https://mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/news/1926392/](https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1926392/). Accessed on January 16, 2024.
- <sup>9</sup> Lee Jeong-Ho, “S Korea calls for UN action amid escalating N Korean provocations,” *Radio Free Asia*, January 18, 2024, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/korea/sk-un-action-01182024211026.html>. Accessed on January 16, 2024.
- <sup>10</sup> Derek Grossman, “China’s Gray-Zone Tactics Show the U.S.-Philippine alliance is working,” *War on the Rocks*, November 7, 2023, <https://warontherocks.com/2023/11/chinas-gray-zone-tactics-show-the-u-s-philippine-alliance-is-working/>. Accessed on January 16, 2024
- <sup>11</sup> Ju-min Park, “S.Korea, Japan scramble jets as China, Russia warplanes enter Seoul’s defence zone,” *Reuters*, December 14, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/skorea-scrambles-jets-china-russia-warplanes-enter-defence-zone-seoul-2023-12-14/>. Accessed on January 16, 2024.
- <sup>12</sup> Indian Navy, “A P8 aircraft of Indian Navy at Guam USA to participate in Exercise Sea Dragon 24,” <https://www.indiannavy.nic.in/content/p8-aircraft-indian-navy-arrived-guam-usa-participate-exercise-sea-dragon-24#:~:text=Sea%20Dragon%2024-,A%20P8%20aircraft%20of%20Indian%20Navy%20arrived%20at%20Guam%20USA,ASW%20aircraft%20conducted%20by%20USNavy>. Accessed on 16 January, 2024.

<sup>13</sup> Ministry of Defence, Government of India, “Sea Phase of ASEAN-India Maritime Exercise-2023,” *Press Information Bureau*, May 9, 2023, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleaseIframePage.aspx?PRID=1922815#:~:text=The%20inaugural%20ASEAN%20India%20Maritime,of%20the%20multilateral%20naval%20exercise>. Accessed on January 16, 2024.

<sup>14</sup> Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, “Joint Readout of the Quad Foreign Ministers’ Meeting,” September 22, 2023. [https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/37144/Joint\\_Readout\\_of\\_the\\_Quad\\_Foreign\\_Ministers\\_Meeting](https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/37144/Joint_Readout_of_the_Quad_Foreign_Ministers_Meeting). Accessed on January 16, 2024.



Centre for Air Power Studies

The Centre for Air Power Studies (CAPS) is an independent, non-profit think tank that undertakes and promotes policy related research, study and discussion on defence and military issues, trends, and development in air power and space for civil and military purposes, as also related issues of national security. The Centre is headed by Air Marshal Anil Chopra PVSM AVSM VM VSM (Retd).

Centre for Air Power Studies

P-284, Arjan Path, Subroto Park, New Delhi 110010

Tel: +91 11 25699130/32, Fax: +91 11 25682533

Editor: Dr Shalini Chawla e-mail: shaluchawla@yahoo.com

Formatting and Assistance: Ms Radhey Tambi, Ms Khyati Singh and Mr Rohit Singh

The views expressed in this brief are those of the author and not necessarily of the Centre or any other organisation.