



By: Tomorrow's Affairs Staff

North Korea is opening bridges to China and Russia, and only one is irreplaceable



Today, trucks bearing Chinese and North Korean flags crossed the **new bridge** over the Yalu River between China's Dandong and North Korea's Sinuiju.

Construction was completed in 2014, but the crossing then waited 12 years for roads and customs facilities on the North Korean side.

In a video address at the ceremony, Chinese Premier Li Qiang said that relations between the two countries had entered a new phase.

For Beijing, this marks the completion of an expensive investment, and for Kim Jong Un it marks the start of more regular supplies across the border on which his economy depends.

A little over a month ago, North Korea also opened a new road bridge to Russia.

The two links were created at a time when Beijing and Moscow are particularly important for the survival of the North Korean regime, but for completely different reasons.

China accounts for most reported foreign trade and has financed a major border crossing.

During the war in Ukraine, Russia has been procuring North Korean weapons, hiring soldiers and workers, and providing military aid that Pyongyang has been trying to secure for years.

Kim can now benefit more from relations with both powers, as both Beijing and Moscow need him.

Russian demand, however, is determined by the course of the war, and Chinese demand by the daily needs of the North Korean economy.

Chinese money and 12 years of waiting

The new bridge is approximately 3,030 metres long, has four traffic lanes and is located about

13 kilometres south-west of the old Friendship Bridge.

China fully financed its construction, which began in 2009, at a cost of approximately 2.2 billion yuan, about \$310 million.

The old crossing has a railway track and only one lane for vehicles, so trucks can pass only alternately.

The route between Dandong and Sinuiju carries more than 70 per cent of the **two countries' official trade**.

The increased capacity is particularly important for transporting machinery, construction materials and industrial equipment.

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The delay also coincided with a cooling of relations after China backed UN Security Council sanctions over North Korea's nuclear and missile tests in 2016 and 2017.

Kim's visit to Beijing in September 2025 and Xi's visit to Pyongyang in June this year accelerated completion of the works that the Chinese side had been awaiting since 2014.

The bridge thus represents a tangible outcome of diplomatic rapprochement.

A comparison with the previous period shows the potential for trade growth. According to Chinese customs data, **bilateral trade** was worth \$2.73 billion in 2025, down from \$6.86 billion in 2014.

Today's volume is approximately 40 per cent of the earlier level. South Korea's state agency Kotra, which uses its own foreign trade

records, estimates that China accounted for 98.2 per cent of North Korea's total reported trade last year.

Such concentration gives Beijing extraordinary influence over its neighbour's supply and investment plans, independent of Moscow's political role.

The war gave Russia a reason to pay more

Kim's value to Moscow increased as the war in Ukraine began to consume vast quantities of ammunition and manpower.

According to the first report of the **Multilateral Sanctions Monitoring Team**, published in May 2025, during 2024 Russian ships transported from North Korea up to nine million artillery shells and rockets for multiple-barrel rocket launchers, as well as at least 100 ballistic missiles.

The same report states that Pyongyang sent more than 11,000 soldiers to Russia at the end of 2024, and more than 3,000 at the beginning of 2025.

In return, Moscow provides Kim with military equipment and expertise that Pyongyang cannot obtain elsewhere because of sanctions.

According to the same report, Russia has delivered at least one Pantsir system to shoot down aircraft, missiles and drones, as well as electronic jamming equipment.

It has also supplied data on how North Korean ballistic missiles hit targets in Ukraine, which has helped to improve their guidance.

Russian instructors have been training North Korean soldiers in the use of artillery and drones, so Kim's army is now gaining experience in a real war and its weapons are being tested on the battlefield.

Moscow is supplying Pyongyang with strategically important goods

The Russian export of petroleum products is particularly significant. A UN Security Council resolution limits North Korea's annual supply of such products to 500,000 barrels.

Research by the Open Source Centre and the BBC, cited by the international team, identified 43 North Korean tanker arrivals at a Russian port between March and October 2024 and shipments estimated at more than one million barrels.

Moscow is therefore supplying Pyongyang with strategically important goods in quantities that, according to those findings, significantly exceed the permitted annual quota.

The **Tumen River Bridge** opened on 7 September in the far north-east of North Korea.

It connects the Russian settlement of Khasan in Primorsky Krai, south-west of Vladivostok, with North Korea's Tumangang, at the point where the borders of Russia, China and North Korea meet.

Russia and North Korea share a border that is only 17 kilometres long, and until now it has been connected only by a railway bridge and air routes.

The new road bridge is about a kilometre long, has two lanes, and can accommodate up to 300 vehicles per day.

The Chinese bridge is much larger and serves a different purpose. It connects China's Dandong, a port city at the confluence of the Yalu River and the Yellow Sea, with Sinuiju in north-western North Korea, about 200 kilometres from Pyongyang.

That route carries the largest share of North Korea's trade with the rest of the world.

The Russian connection is more modest and supports cooperation that has developed during the war in Ukraine, primarily in the military industry and politics.

Money from workers ends up in Pyongyang

A **September report** by the same international team estimated that, at the end of 2025, between 20,000 and 70,000 North Korean citizens were working in China, and between 15,000 and 30,000 in Russia, where there had been about 8,000 a year earlier. In Russia, they are also employed in war-related industries.

The team alleges that North Korean workers were sent to Geran-2 drone factories in the Alabuga Special Economic Zone in Tatarstan.

More than 98 per cent of the visas that Russia issued to North Korean citizens in 2025 were student visas, and Russian regulations have been changed so that even with such a visa they may work for a salary.

The report describes the use of student visas for work in construction, manufacturing and agriculture.

It is estimated that over the last year the regime has earned between \$450 million and \$800 million from the work of its citizens abroad, taking 80 to 90 per cent of their earnings.

Behind that income are people working under strict supervision, often in extremely difficult conditions.

Beijing, which previously supported the imposition of sanctions, is now renewing economic ties with Pyongyang

According to the September report, Chinese firms' employment of North Korean workers is also a violation of Security Council bans, as are Russia's dealings with Pyongyang.

In March 2024, Russia vetoed the extension of the mandate of the **UN expert group** that monitored the implementation of sanctions against North Korea.

The bans themselves remained in force, and 11 countries later established a multilateral team to collect evidence of violations.

For Pyongyang, the Russian veto was an important diplomatic asset, as regular international supervision was weakened.

Thus, in addition to weapons and oil, Moscow made available its influence in the Security Council.

Beijing, which previously supported the imposition of sanctions, is now renewing economic ties with a neighbour whose military programme enjoys increasing backing from Russia.

What did Kim gain from the lack of conflict between Moscow and Beijing?

At a **military parade in Beijing** on 3 September 2025, Kim stood alongside Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin.

China and Russia now share an interest in maintaining relations with Pyongyang and limiting American influence in Asia.

Kim exploits the fact that each of them has a different reason for continuing to work with him.



Beijing maintains influence over a neighbouring state whose destabilisation would threaten China's border and security interests on the Korean Peninsula - Xi Jinping

Xi's visit to Pyongyang on 8–9 June was his first since 2019. Chinese and North Korean statements after the meeting omitted any reference to denuclearisation, as did China's announcement of **Kim's visit to Beijing** in 2025.

Beijing thereby emphasises political stability and cooperation, while North Korea's nuclear arsenal remains off the published agenda for the meetings.

Xi also proposed increasing **military exchanges**, which was mentioned in the Chinese account but omitted from the North Korean account of the talks.

Such a relationship suits Kim, who receives trade concessions and political support without any public debate about relinquishing his most important deterrent.

At the same time, Beijing maintains influence over a neighbouring state whose destabilisation would threaten China's border and security interests on the Korean Peninsula.

Moscow gains support for the war, while North Korea gains access to Russian military technology and additional revenue. T

heir interests currently align closely enough for the three governments to sustain close cooperation.

After the war, Russia will need Kim less; China will not

Over the next year, trade through Dandong, a Chinese city on the border with North Korea, is likely to grow, but because of sanctions and North Korea's weak economy it will remain well below its 2014 level.

Military cooperation with Russia will greatly benefit Pyongyang as long as Moscow needs North Korean munitions and workers for its weapons factories during the war.

The 2024 partnership agreement will remain in place after the war, but once Russia needs fewer weapons and men, Kim will no longer be able to obtain from it what he receives today.

Kim is needed by both powers today, but the duration of their need for him will differ

Even then, Beijing will continue to provide most of what North Korea needs on a daily basis, from markets and industrial materials to transport routes.

Moscow has increased Pyongyang's value through the war, while China has preserved the economic infrastructure on which Pyongyang's long-term survival depends.

Kim is needed by both powers today, but the duration of their need for him will differ.

It is this difference that will determine his position when the conditions of the war in Ukraine change. Today Kim negotiates with two powers, but is permanently dependent on only one.