

# ISSUE BRIEF

## Executive Summary

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## Outlook for DPRK-Russia Relations in 2025 and South Korea's Response

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In 2025, there are four key developments to watch in DPRK–Russia relations. *First*, following the new DPRK–Russia treaty signed in 2024, their relationship is likely to move beyond military and security cooperation and gradually expand into areas such as the economy, society, and culture. *Second*, Russia is expected to actively push for easing the sanctions regime on North Korea and to invest in logistics infrastructure to mitigate structural barriers to bilateral cooperation, as North Korea remains a useful partner in Russia's Asia-Pacific strategy. *Third*, the development of DPRK–Russia relations may progress more slowly than anticipated, as Russia faces clear limitations in serving as a true alternative to China for North Korea, and the structural constraints surrounding this relationship will take time to resolve. *Lastly*, with expected partial sanctions relief—particularly in the financial sector—as U.S.–Russia ceasefire talks advance, South Korean companies with significant Russian market share, such as Hyundai (which retained a foothold through “buy-back options”), should be quietly permitted to reenter the market as part of a broader effort to rebuild ties with Moscow.

### Implications of DPRK-Russia Cooperation and South Korea's Response

Within the broader framework of the new treaty, Russia's strategic objectives include: advancing its vision of a “new,” “just,” and “multipolar” world order; leveraging the DPRK partnership to shape a Russia-centric security framework in Northeast Asia and the wider Asia-Pacific; and ensuring that trade and economic cooperation reach a transformative turning point to sustain long-term alignment. In this context, while South Korea's participation may not be immediately necessary, the possibility of future cooperation—such as through projects like the Rajin–Khasan railway—could be left open.

For North Korea, it is likely to continue weighing the prospects of talks with the United States while seeking to exploit the dynamics of great-power diplomacy between the U.S. and Russia,

U.S. and China, and China and Russia. It may attempt to justify closer DPRK–Russia–China alignment by framing ROK–U.S.–Japan trilateral cooperation as a shared threat—not only to North Korea, but also to China and Russia. In addition, North Korea will likely seek to convert wartime debts owed by Russia into tangible gains such as advanced military technology and assistance in addressing its energy and food crises.

South Korea must prepare comprehensive strategic responses toward the United States, Russia, China, Japan, and North Korea in the post-war context. As the United States shifts toward prioritizing ceasefire negotiations over continued military aid to Ukraine, South Korea should focus its support on defensive assistance (e.g., preventing further territorial loss) and humanitarian aid. With both the United States and Russia pressuring Ukraine to conduct long-delayed elections, South Korea should maintain its current level of support in alignment with NATO allies, and consider increasing aid post-elections.

Although South Korea–Russia relations are currently under considerable strain, post-war sanctions relief could create opportunities for improvement. However, South Korea should avoid any abrupt pivot toward pro-Russia engagement. Instead, it should pursue a gradual, measured restoration of ties within the bounds of international consensus, while clearly working to contain the negative effects of DPRK–Russia ties on the Korean Peninsula.

In the economic and financial sphere, the United States may partially lift financial sanctions as an incentive during ceasefire negotiations—such as by reconnecting select Russian banks to the SWIFT system. South Korea should align itself with such developments, benefiting from Russia’s reintegration into the global financial system without taking the lead or breaking with its allies.

One of the most critical issues in Korea–Russia economic cooperation will be the timeline for the return of firms such as Hyundai Motor, which sold its local plants with a “buy-back option” guaranteeing priority rights to repurchase shares in the future. Quiet government support may be needed to facilitate such returns. In cases where companies like Korean Air were fined, more explicit government-level assistance may be required. However, given that a full restoration of EU–Russia relations may take significant time, such cooperation strategies could risk undermining South Korea’s standing within the broader democratic alliance. Therefore, South Korea should prioritize recovering market share in sectors where it had strong pre-2022 advantages. Before the war, Korean companies held significant positions in Russia’s automotive, electrical equipment, electronics, and shipbuilding markets.

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