**Why is Putin backing North Korea? To build up Russia as a great power.**

By Samuel Ramani July 26

On July 6, the Russian delegation to the United Nations [released an official statement](https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-objects-us-drafted-measure-condemning-north-korea-icbm-test-un-security-council/28600831.html), criticizing Washington’s handling of the North Korean crisis. In their statement, Russian diplomats [disputed U.S. allegations](http://www.thediplomat.com/2017/07/why-is-russia-denying-that-north-korea-launched-an-icbm/) that North Korea launched an intercontinental ballistic missile against Japan on July 4, saying rather, that Pyongyang had launched an intermediate-ranged rocket. Russia also opposed U.N. proposals for tighter economic sanctions against Pyongyang.

Numerous Western analysts, like Bloomberg View columnist [Leonid Bershidsky](https://www.bloomberg.com/view/articles/2017-05-18/the-key-to-north-korea-is-russia) and Council of Foreign Relations fellow [Van Jackson](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/east-asia/2015-02-22/putin-and-hermit-kingdom), have attempted to explain Russia’s conduct by highlighting Moscow’s economic and geopolitical links to Pyongyang. But there’s more. Moscow defends North Korea in a way that’s designed to get both the Russian public and the international community to see Russia as a great power.

My doctoral [research](https://www.academia.edu/33861268/Explaining_Russia_s_Increasingly_Aggressive_Responses_to_Popular_Revolutions_From_the_Coloured_Revolutions_to_the_Crises_in_Ukraine_and_Syria_An_Instrumental_Constructivist_Approach) focuses on how, during international crises, Kremlin elites remind audiences that Russia is a great power. The goal is to rally public support for their policies and increase Moscow’s international position as a credible counterweight to U.S. hegemony.

You can see this in two ways: first, in Russia’s attempts to showcase itself as more effective at resolving conflicts in the Korean Peninsula than the United States; and second, in Russia’s efforts to lead an international coalition against Washington’s coercion of North Korea.

**Russia wants to prove it’s a better international broker than the United States**

Since Vladimir Putin’s third term started in 2012, Kremlin policymakers have often stepped in to settle conflicts. That’s to remind the world that Russia is a great power. Russia often reminds the world of its lead role in diplomatic settlements, as with the 2013 Syrian chemical weapons disarmament deal. The point is to show the international community that Russia can solve problems the United States cannot.

Further, whenever any country asks Moscow for help in mediating a conflict, the Russian state media trumpets that heartily. These requests show off Moscow’s international influence to nationalists at home, and refute Western perceptions that Russia is diplomatically isolated.

We can see both of these approaches in Russia’s response to North Korea’s ballistic missile tests. Since North Korea’s April 2017 ballistic missile tests, Russia has consistently argued that its strategy of [maintaining favorable relations](https://sputniknews.com/politics/201704301053148568-north-korea-crisis/) with both North and South Korea is more likely to peacefully resolve the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) crisis than Washington’s aggressive posturing toward North Korea.

For instance, in May, Russian President Vladimir Putin told South Korea’s special envoy Song Young-gil that he would be willing to [dispatch a Russian diplomatic delegation](http://www.realclearworld.com/articles/2017/05/28/why_russia_cant_end_the_north_korea_crisis_112361.html) to the Korean Peninsula to mediate between the DPRK and South Korea (ROK).

During that [phone conversation](https://geopoliticalfutures.com/why-russia-cant-end-the-north-korea-crisis/), Putin also criticized Washington’s [THAAD (Terminal High Altitude Area Defense) missile](http://www.newsweek.com/thaad-missile-system-south-korea-590197) system, designed to shoot down short, medium and intermediate range ballistic missiles, which has begun to be [deployed in South Korea](http://thediplomat.com/2017/07/chinese-south-korean-presidents-meet-after-north-korea-icbm-test/). Putin justified this criticism by arguing that THAAD actually worsens tensions with North Korea and threatens Russia’s security, while failing to adequately defend South Korea against North Korean artillery.

South Korea’s decision to suspend a major THAAD deployment on June 8 reveals that some senior members of South Korean President Moon Jae-in’s left-wing coalition [agree with Russia](http://www.cnn.com/2016/06/07/asia/south-korea-thaad-suspended/index.html). That amplifies Putin’s ability to promote his message that Russia is better at conflict resolution than the United States and helps him convince other countries of Russia’s indispensability in world affairs.

**2. Russia is trying to reinforce its image at home as a great power**

You can see this in the Russian state media’s enthusiastic and oft-repeated coverage every time an international leader praises, however slightly, Moscow’s involvement in the North Korean crisis.

For instance, the Russian state media has repeatedly mentioned Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi’s [consultation with his Russian counterpart](https://sputniknews.com/asia/201706281055048195-russia-north-korea-roadmap/) Sergei Lavrov on the crisis and, has showcased public statements by leaders, like Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte, who have backed Russia’s [support for a political solution](https://www.rt.com/news/386612-duterte-says-n-korean-leader-kim-want-world-end/) to the North Korean crisis.

All that is aimed at the Russian public — and shows that Kremlin elites pay a great deal of attention to how their citizens perceive Russia’s role in the world. The importance of public opinion in shaping Russian foreign policy is also revealed through analyzing polling data. The [Levada Center’s survey](http://www.levada.ru/en/2017/01/09/russia-as-a-great-power/)revealed that in 2011, 47 percent of Russians saw their nation as a great power. By 2016, as Russia has gotten increasingly involved in regional conflicts, that number had jumped to 64 percent.

As Russia takes an increasingly assertive approach to world affairs, it reminds its citizens of the Soviet Union’s status as a superpower that could influence conflicts worldwide. In this respect, Russia’s increased attention to North Korea is much like its military intervention in Syria, and its expanded diplomatic presence in Libya and Afghanistan. Through active involvement in international crises in the Middle East and the Asia-Pacific region, Moscow is trying once again to project itself as a global power.

**3. Russia wants to lead the nations that resist what they see as U.S. diplomatic and military coercion**

But Russia wants to be recognized as a global leader not just within its own borders but among the international community as well. And so its position on North Korea is linked to its desire to lead an informal coalition of countries that believe that the United States is trying to overthrow the North Korean regime. This leadership role would strengthen Russia’s claim to be a great power and would bolster its claim to be the leading international counterweight to the United States.

And so when China [halted energy exports](http://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-economy-trade-northkorea-idUSKBN18J0C6) to the DPRK, Russia has stepped into the gap left — and has since positioned itself as the rogue country’s leading international ally. Toward that end, the Kremlin has invested in the [North Korea’s infrastructure](https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/russia-seizes-opportunity-north-korea)and in [technical cooperation](http://thediplomat.com/2017/02/russias-love-affair-with-north-korea/) with Pyongyang.

As a result of these investments, Russia has drawn support from a number of traditionally anti-Western countries, like [Cuba](https://panampost.com/editor/2017/05/04/castro-defends-north-korean-dictator-trump-pressure/) and [Iran](https://www.cfr.org/interview/north-korea-iran-nuclear-cooperation) — which sided with Russia on Syria and backed its 2014 annexation in Crimea. Putin’s North Korea strategy helps him expand and cement Russia’s network of allies.

In short, Russia wants to be, and be seen as, a great power. It wants to lead the nations that resist Western power and influence. In defying the United Nations and supporting North Korea, Russia bolsters that status at home and abroad.

And so Moscow’s alignment with North Korea will likely get stronger in the near future.