

MANUFACTURING THREAT AND FRIENDSHIP: NORTH KOREAN STATE MEDIA AND THE EMERGENCE OF A STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP WITH RUSSIA

Jana CHAMROVA,

PhD Candidate, Faculty of Arts, History and Culture of Asian Countries, Charles University,
Consultant at the Korea-Europe Network, Prague, Czech Republic.
E-mail address: jana.chamrova@ff.cuni.cz

***Abstract:** This paper examines how North Korean state media has reflected and discursively constructed the deepening relationship between the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) and the Russian Federation in the context of Russia’s war in Ukraine. While public debate often emphasises material cooperation, this study argues that DPRK media provides evidence of a gradual, strategic alignment, built through narrative cues, historical analogies and ideological framing that present Russia as a principled partner confronting the West. Using a constructed four-week sample of Korean-language articles from 2015 and 2025, this research combines qualitative content analysis with critical discourse and narrative analysis to trace how Russia’s function in DPRK discourse shifts from relatively routinized “friendship” to a more central role as legitimating authority, moral ally and counter-hegemonic pole. The findings suggest that North Korean media is not merely reporting cooperation but actively stabilising a worldview in which DPRK–Russia partnership belongs to a polarised international order.*

***Keywords:** North Korea; Russia; state media; strategic partnership; polarization; security discourse.*

Introduction

Russia’s war against Ukraine has had global repercussions well beyond the European security environment. For North Korea, the conflict has provided not only an opportunity for diplomatic positioning but also a discursive resource through which the regime articulates its vision of the international order in the context of DPRK-Russia relations (Armstrong 2013; Cha 2012; Toloraya 2025). This paper explores how North Korean state media represents the evolving relationship between Pyongyang and Moscow, arguing that media narratives reveal the gradual emergence of a strategic partnership rather than a temporary alignment of convenience. In doing so, the study sheds light on the ideological framing behind Pyongyang’s portrayal of Russia as both a trusted friend and a fellow antagonist of the West. North Korean media, long used to manufacture a sense of external threat and embattled solidarity, appears to be “manufacturing friendship” with Russia as a natural counterpart to those threats.

The focus on 2015 versus 2025 provides a baseline and a contrast at the same time. In 2015, DPRK–Russia ties were cordial and commemorative, however Russia was not consistently positioned as an indispensable strategic “co-protagonist” in DPRK worldmaking. By 2025, after years of intensified confrontation between Russia and the West, DPRK media increasingly frames Russia as a morally aligned partner whose struggle mirrors North Korea’s own confrontation with “hostile forces”. In this sense, the DPRK press appears to be doing two things at once: manufacturing threat (by reiterating an embattled worldview) and manufacturing friendship (by narratively stabilising Russia as a principled ally).

This paper contributes to security-oriented media research by treating DPRK news not only as propaganda, but also as political storytelling: a genre in which states become characters with narrative roles. Rather than measuring “bias” as deviation from factual reporting, the analysis examines how Russia is made meaningful through repeated discursive functions, narrative roles and storytelling strategies.

1. Framing Alliance and Threat in North Korean State Media

North Korean state media has historically played a central role in constructing external threat perceptions and legitimising foreign policy choices. By examining these narratives, this study contributes to understanding how North Korea interprets global polarisation and positions itself within an emerging multipolar or bipolar order. Prior scholarship has documented North Korea's adept use of propaganda to justify its policy and isolate domestic audiences from alternative viewpoints (Armstrong 2013; Lankov 2014). However, less attention has been paid to how allies are framed in DPRK discourse. The DPRK's relations with Russia have fluctuated since the Cold War, from the patron-client dynamics of the Soviet era to estrangement in the 1990s and cautious engagement in the 2000s (Wishnick 2003).

Recent developments point to a qualitative deepening of DPRK–Russia relations that goes beyond diplomatic symbolism. Since the outbreak of Russia's full-scale war in Ukraine, Pyongyang and Moscow have not only aligned positions on major international issues and intensified high-level exchanges, but have also been widely reported to engage in material cooperation linked to the conflict, including the supply of munitions and the deployment of North Korean personnel in support roles. These developments have led a growing number of analysts to describe the relationship as an emerging quasi-alliance, reviving patterns of bloc-based alignment reminiscent of the Cold War. As Toloraya (2025) notes, under conditions of sustained rivalry with the United States and its allies, the DPRK–Russia relationship increasingly appears “built to last”.

Against this backdrop, this paper situates its inquiry at the intersection of media studies and international security. Rather than assessing the operational or military effectiveness of DPRK–Russia cooperation, it examines how Pyongyang's official media discursively constructs this partnership and embeds it within a broader narrative of global polarisation. State-controlled media in the DPRK serves as the primary conduit for these narratives. Previous studies on North Korean propaganda (e.g., Myers 2010 on racialised nationalist narratives) show that portrayals of foreign countries can reveal Pyongyang's strategic intentions. For instance, media depiction of China tends to emphasise fraternal ties but carefully avoids suggesting North Korean dependence, reflecting a concern for equal footing. How, then, is Russia depicted when it shifts from being a secondary partner to a potential “comrade-in-arms”?

Research Design Research Design and Analytical Framework

The corpus consists of Korean-language state media texts collected via a constructed-week sampling strategy, designed to capture routine patterns while avoiding overrepresentation of single events. The study analyses four constructed weeks: two from 2015 (H1 and H2) drawn from Rodong Sinmun, the Korea Workers' Party daily; and two from 2025 (H3 and H4) drawn from the Korea Central News Agency, the DPRK's official news agency, comprising approximately 850 news items.¹ The 2015 weeks serve as a baseline for the intensity and function of Russia references prior to the major post-2022 geopolitical shift; the 2025 weeks capture discourse under conditions of heightened polarisation and wartime alignment.

The analysis follows the discourse-analytical tradition that treats media texts as sites of ideological encoding (Fairclough 1995; van Dijk 2008). Articles were examined through close qualitative reading using a multi-layered coding framework developed iteratively after an initial pilot reading of the corpus. Drawing on Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and narrative theory, particularly Propp's concept of narrative roles (Propp 1968), the framework captures not only the presence of Russia in DPRK media but the functions, roles and meanings assigned to it. Combining CDA with narrative analysis allows the study to conceptualise Russia not merely as an external actor,

¹ KCNA was used for the 2025 constructed weeks due to archival availability. KCNA functions as the primary distributor of official DPRK news and substantially overlaps with Rodong Sinmun in political and foreign-policy reporting. This choice follows the design of a wider doctoral project and does not affect the study's focus on discursive patterns.

but as a discursive construct, i.e. a character within North Korea's political storytelling about the international order.

The analysis operates across three analytical layers. First, it identifies the *discursive functions* Russia serves in the text, such as external legitimation, moral alignment, or counter-hegemonic positioning. Second, it examines the *narrative roles* attributed to Russia, treating foreign actors as characters within North Korea's political storytelling (e.g., helper, comrade-in-arms or symbolic supporter). Third, it analyses *storytelling strategies* through which these portrayals are stabilised, including temporal compression (linking past, present, and future), personalisation and silencing or omission of contradictory information.

Rather than assigning each article to a single category, the analysis identifies dominant patterns across the corpus and illustrates them through recurring lexical cues and formulations. All translations from Korean belong to the author. Quoted expressions represent recurrent discursive patterns observed across the constructed-week samples rather than isolated verbatim statements. This approach allows the study to trace shifts in the meaning and function of Russia in DPRK media discourse over time, while remaining sensitive to the highly ritualised and formulaic nature of North Korean state reporting.²

2. Findings and Analysis: From “Friend” to “Comrade” – Evolving Portrayals of Russia (2015 vs 2025)

In 2015, North Korean media references to Russia were cordial and ceremonial, stressing *traditional friendship* and cooperation, but typically in a muted, routinised fashion. Russia was one of several friendly nations mentioned and often appeared in contexts like cultural exchanges, messages on anniversaries or foreign news commentary about U.S. actions. By 2025, the tone and intensity of Russia's portrayal had transformed. Russia is now depicted as a central strategic partner, morally aligned with North Korea against common adversaries. The frequency and prominence of Russia-related stories increased and the language grew more ideological (anti-imperialist) and fraternal. In what follows, we dissect these changes through the layers of discursive functions, narrative roles and storytelling strategies, using illustrative examples from the corpus.

2.1. Discursive Functions: What Russia does in DPRK discourse

This section maps what Russia *does* in DPRK discourse, tracing a shift from largely routinised mention in 2015 to more explicit strategic meaning-making in 2025.

2.1.1. External Legitimation

In both 2015 and 2025, Russia functions as a source of external validation for the North Korean regime, but the visibility and intensity of this legitimation change markedly over time. In 2015, such validation was largely implicit. DPRK media highlighted favorable coverage by Russian outlets such as TASS or Pravda of Kim Jong-un's activities, suggesting that international recognition, especially from Russia, conferred prestige and legitimacy. Occasional reports of formal greetings from Russian political figures, including leaders of the Russian Communist Party and the LDPR, further signaled recognition, though the language remained restrained and procedural rather than overtly propagandistic.

By 2025, external legitimation becomes explicit and celebrated. DPRK media prominently reports Russian endorsement of North Korean positions in international forums, including opposition to UN resolutions and affirmation of Pyongyang's right to self-defence. Such instances are framed as Russia validating North Korea's stance as just and strategically sound. This elevation is reflected in

² Given the qualitative, discourse-analytic focus of the study and the instability of DPRK media archives, individual articles are not cited separately in the analysis. Instead, examples are attributed to the relevant corpus year (2015 or 2025), which is sufficient for analytical distinction and replication within the constructed-week framework.

official language: a 2025 KCNA report quoting Foreign Minister Choe Son-hui describes relations with Russia as a “powerful strategic element” for regional security, explicitly positioning Russia as a legitimating authority. Leader-to-leader exchanges further reinforce this role. Kim Jong-un’s congratulatory messages to Vladimir Putin and reciprocal praise from Russian leaders are quoted to underline that bilateral ties have reached the level of a “strategic partnership”. DPRK media frequently employs evaluative verbs such as “highly appraise” and “extol” to characterise Russian statements, foregrounding Russia’s approval of Kim’s leadership and policy line.

Overall, external legitimation shifts from indirect and symbolic in 2015 to overt and politically instrumental in 2025, reflecting Pyongyang’s increased reliance on Russian endorsement under conditions of heightened global polarisation.

2.1.2. Moral Alliance

Perhaps the most striking shift from 2015 to 2025 lies in the portrayal of Russia as a moral and ideological ally. In 2015, DPRK media described relations with Russia in polite, commemorative terms, emphasising historical friendship and cooperation rooted in the Soviet role in Korea’s liberation. Coverage of events such as the “DPRK-Russia Friendship Year” stressed “traditional friendly relations” developing “ever better day by day”, with references to friendship and cooperation largely confined to cultural exchanges and ceremonial goodwill. Importantly, Russia was not yet positioned as sharing a common enemy with North Korea; even critical references to U.S. policy appeared as general international commentary rather than expressions of DPRK–Russia solidarity.

By 2025, this framing shifts decisively. Russia is cast as a strategic moral ally, firmly placed on the “us” side of an ideological us-versus-them divide. DPRK media increasingly employs fraternal language, referring to Russia as a comradely or brotherly ally and emphasising a shared “common struggle” against imperialism. Articles invoke morally charged concepts such as justice, sovereignty and dignity, framing Russia and North Korea as jointly defending these values against Western hostility. In this discourse, Russia is no longer simply friendly but is bound to the DPRK through principles described as timeless and sacralised, often reinforced through war-time analogies referencing World War II and the Korean War. The transformation is clear: where Russia was a *friend* in 2015, it becomes a *comrade* by 2025.

This moralisation is especially significant when viewed against earlier alliance narratives. Notably, DPRK media begins to apply historical analogies previously reserved for China – particularly the Korean War-era trope of righteous solidarity against imperial aggression – to Russia. By invoking this lineage, contemporary cooperation with Russia is framed as analogous to China’s intervention in the 1950s, effectively elevating Russia to the status of an ideological comrade following in China’s historic footsteps. Through this discursive move, DPRK media “manufactures friendship” by embedding Russia within the same moral universe that legitimises North Korea’s own revolutionary identity.

2.1.3. Militarisation Normalisation

North Korean media has long justified its militarisation by reference to external threats or historical sacrifices. In this regard, Russia’s role in the narrative adds a comparative and justificatory element. In 2015, direct references to Russia in a military context were relatively rare, since at that time Russia was not directly engaged in any widely acknowledged conflict (Crimea/Donbass were ongoing but DPRK media touched them lightly). One notable example from 2015 was an article about U.S. missile defence, where the DPRK paper described “Russia countering U.S. military pressure”. This piece, while ostensibly foreign news, implicitly drew a parallel: just as Russia must enhance its defences due to U.S. encirclement, so must North Korea. The article detailed Russia’s military upgrades (new ICBM tests, anti-missile systems) in sympathetic tones, clearly suggesting that Russia’s militarisation is a rational response to Western threats – an analogy not lost on a North Korean reader. Therefore, even in 2015, Russia was used to *normalise the idea of military build-up*:

if a great power like Russia is doing it in face of U.S. hostility, it validates North Korea doing the same. However, this was somewhat indirect.

By 2025, Russia's war in Ukraine and confrontation with NATO provided a much more explicit template for normalising militaristic themes. North Korean media openly sided with Russia's narrative of the war. Although they often avoided naming "Ukraine" directly (a silence that we will discuss later), they echoed Russian justifications. For example, articles spoke of Russia "fulfilling its international duty to oppose fascism in Ukraine" – a portrayal that glorifies Russia's military actions as heroic and necessary, thus implicitly casting North Korea's own military posture (nuclear tests, missile launches) as likewise part of a noble anti-fascist, anti-imperialist cause.

News stories about Russian Victory Day commemorations were given significant space, emphasising "sacred sacrifice" and "heroic struggle" of the Russian army. By repeatedly highlighting Russian veterans, war anniversaries and Putin's invocation of the Great Patriotic War (i.e. World War II in Russian political discourse), DPRK media reinforces its own militarised worldview. While North Korea does maintain an anti-fascist narrative rooted in its anti-Japanese resistance against colonial rule, it lacks a mass, society-wide anti-fascist war memory comparable to the Soviet experience. Russia's Great Patriotic War thus provides a more expansive and morally universal framework, which DPRK media appropriates to normalise contemporary militarisation and frame present conflicts as historically justified resistance. North Korea often analogises its situation to the 1940s or 1950s; now Russia's contemporary fight is analogised to those struggles also. The outcome is a discursive synergy: Russia's current militarism *normalises* North Korea's perpetual military mobilisation. One KCNA commentary in late 2025 even argued that *just as Russia stands firm against NATO, North Korea must bolster its deterrence against the U.S.–ROK³ alliance*, directly linking the two situations. In sum, Russia's portrayal in 2025 strongly serves to rationalise and elevate North Korea's Songun (military-first) policy as part of a wider legitimate resistance. This is a significant evolution from 2015, when Russia was not actively used as such a prominent mirror for DPRK's own military justification.

2.1.4. Implicit Polarisation

A core discursive function that becomes prominent by 2025 is Russia as an *external pole in an implicitly polarised narrative*. North Korean propaganda has always relied on dichotomies (e.g. imperialists vs independent peoples). In 2015, Russia occasionally figured into this schema but carefully. For instance, an article might criticise U.S. actions by citing Russian critiques – effectively using Russia to voice condemnation of the West, which the DPRK narrator can then amplify. In the aforementioned 2015 piece regarding the U.S. missile defence, the writer notes that "Russia refuted that the U.S. missile defense is clearly aimed at it and causes rising tensions". Here, Russia is the one calling out the hostile (American) force, implying a world divided into a U.S.-led bloc and those resisting it. Yet in 2015, DPRK media still did not explicitly say "Russia and we are together against the West".

By 2025, the polarisation is explicit in sentiment if not always in naming. North Korean media frequently invokes a global divide between anti-imperialist forces and a hostile Western bloc. However, rather than crudely saying "new Cold War blocs", they often imply it. Russia is consistently on the "good" side of this implication. For example, KCNA articles would mention "external threats" and "hostile forces" in the same breath as praising Russia. The enemy is often unnamed – possibly "imperialists" or "hegemonic forces" in general – but contextually it is clear that means the U.S., NATO, Japan, etc. By not naming the U.S. every time, the media uses what Fowler calls meaning through absence (Fowler 1991). Readers fill in the blank: if Russia and DPRK are celebrating a partnership of justice and sovereignty, the adversary must be the unjust imperialists (everyone knows who they are).

A concrete instance of this came with North Korean coverage of the expansion of trilateral U.S.-ROK-Japan cooperation in 2025. One DPRK commentary noted that "our relations with Russia will prove a powerful strategic factor if the U.S. and its puppets persist in aggression", without detailing what that means. The phrase signals: North Korea and Russia stand aligned ("strategic

³ ROK denotes the Republic of Korea (South Korea).

factor”) against the U.S. bloc. Thus, the polarisation function is fully realised – Russia is depicted as the counter-hegemonic pole balancing the U.S. and by extension as part of North Korea’s own camp. This is a notable change from 2015, where China was often given more weight as a partner against the U.S. while Russia was secondary. By 2025, the media places Russia in parallel with China as pillars of a friendly camp. In fact, North Korean outlets sometimes mention Russia and China together (e.g. referencing support from both at the UN). The ideological message is that the world is now divided and North Korea is not alone: Russia is on its side.

2.2. Narrative Roles: What Russia is as a “character” in the story

Beyond abstract functions, the DPRK media also “casts” Russia in certain narrative roles within its storytelling. Using Proppian narrative analysis as a heuristic, we identify roles like *Helper/Donor*, *Witness*, *Brother-in-Arms* and *Gatekeeper* that Russia fulfills. These roles are present in both periods but with different frequencies and emphasis⁴.

2.2.1. Helper/Donor: From symbolic gestures to more strategic support cues

In 2015, Russia often appears in the narrative as a symbolic supporter, present through messages, formal gestures or acknowledgements timed to politically meaningful occasions. The recurring cue “at a meaningful time” is important: it frames support as providential and appropriate, reinforcing the idea that Russia “shows up” when the DPRK’s storyline requires external recognition.

In 2025, the helper role is narratively amplified. Even where concrete material cooperation is not described in detail, the rhetorical structure implies that Russia’s presence and stance provide the DPRK with strategic reinforcement. The “helper” framing therefore functions as a bridge between domestic legitimacy and foreign alignment: Russia appears as a benefactor-like partner without casting the DPRK as dependent.

2.2.2. Brother-in-arms / Comrade: The key narrative upgrade in 2025

The most consequential narrative shift is the emergence of Russia as a co-fighter rather than a peripheral friend. In 2015, this role was marginal and largely historical or implicit. By 2025, it becomes central: the language of *shared struggle* and *moral alignment* recasts Russia as a peer actor within the DPRK’s conflictual worldview. Where such cues appear, Russia is no longer merely friendly; it becomes a co-protagonist in an anti-imperialist struggle, providing ideological justification for strategic alignment.

By 2025, the comrade-in-arms trope operates as a present-tense narrative rather than historical reference. DPRK media explicitly depicts Russia as having “formed a common front” with North Korea, frequently collapsing past and present through compressed historical analogies. References to World War II and anti-fascist resistance are repurposed to frame contemporary cooperation as the continuation of a shared historical mission. Russia is thus labeled a “comrade” not only through inherited memory, but through an ongoing “struggle for justice” conducted in parallel in Moscow and Pyongyang.

Russia is never portrayed as a patron or superior power, but as fighting side-by-side with the DPRK. The frequent use of comradely language in leader-level interactions underscores equality, mutual respect and shared sacrifice. In propaganda terms, elevating Russian leaders to the status of “comrade” places them within the DPRK’s inner ideological circle, a designation typically reserved for socialist fraternity. In this way, a role only faintly present in 2015 becomes, by 2025, a stabilised narrative of Russia as an active brother-in-arms in the present tense.

⁴ For reasons of space the analysis focuses only on selected examples that are most representative of the broader patterns observed.

2.2.3. Gatekeeper to the World

A third role is Russia as a *gatekeeper* enabling controlled access to the outside world under sanctions and isolation. In 2015 this appears sporadically (Russia-hosted events; occasional UN coverage implying Moscow helps make Pyongyang's position heard). By 2025, the framing is clearer: DPRK media credits Russia with shielding North Korea diplomatically and amplifying its positions in international settings, while also narrativising practical connectivity (e.g., Pyongyang–Moscow links) as part of the “strategic partnership.” Russia thus functions not only as a bilateral ally but as a curated corridor for external engagement without hostile scrutiny.

2.3. Storytelling Strategies: How the “friendship” story is stabilised

North Korean state media relies on a set of recurring storytelling strategies to stabilise and naturalise the DPRK-Russia partnership. These include *ritualisation* (presenting cooperation as ceremonial and historically inevitable), *personalisation* (anchoring interstate relations in leader-to-leader ties), *temporal compression* (linking past, present and future into a continuous narrative) and *silencing or omission* (excluding dissonant information that could complicate the partnership's moral clarity)⁵.

2.3.1. Temporal Compression: “Past–present–future” continuity as an alliance technology

A central strategy in the 2025 discourse is *temporal compression*, i.e. the collapsing of historical memory and future destiny into a single storyline of continuity. Lexical cues such as “inherit/continue”, “tradition” formulations and implied permanence present DPRK-Russia alignment as something that transcends tactical convenience. Instead of saying “we cooperate because of circumstances”, the narrative says: we cooperate because history and principle demand it.

This matters in security terms because it shifts the partnership from “contingent” to “natural.” If the alliance is narrated as historically rooted and forward-moving, it becomes harder, both discursively and politically, to reverse.

2.3.2. Silencing/omission: Ukraine and the costs of alignment structurally absent

A second central storytelling strategy is *silencing*. DPRK media never frames Russia in ways that would complicate the moral clarity of the partnership, most notably by avoiding any portrayal of Russia as an aggressor in Ukraine. Instead, reporting relies on euphemism, abstraction and blame displacement, preserving Russia's image as a morally coherent ally and minimising cognitive dissonance for domestic audiences.

Within the 2025 constructed-week corpus analysed here, North Korean coverage does not refer to Russia's actions as an “invasion” or as a war initiated by Moscow. When Ukraine appears at all, it is filtered through Russian framing, via references to a “special military operation”, NATO expansion or vague formulations, such as a “crisis” or “situation” caused by Western forces. Civilian harm, battlefield setbacks, international condemnation and the economic costs of sanctions are entirely absent. Any acknowledgement of difficulty is oblique, expressed through vague phrases such as Russia “facing challenges while continuing to stand firm”, without specifying their source.

Silencing also extends to the bilateral relationship itself. DPRK media never acknowledges disagreement, asymmetry or constraint in DPRK–Russia relations, nor does it reference instances where Russian interests might diverge from Pyongyang's. Third-party perspectives that could complicate the narrative are similarly excluded, while only supportive foreign voices are amplified. The result is a tightly controlled discursive environment in which alignment with Russia appears universally endorsed, morally justified and cost-free – an essential condition for sustaining domestic legitimacy in the context of a globally contested war.

⁵ Given space constraints, this section focuses on two analytically central strategies that are most consequential for understanding how the partnership is framed as durable and uncontested: temporal compression and silencing. Together, these techniques allow DPRK media to present cooperation with Russia as historically destined, forward-looking and free of contradiction, thereby reinforcing the perception of a stable strategic alliance.

3. Discussion: From Portrayal to Partnership – Media Framing and Alliance Legitimation

This discussion situates the empirical findings within broader debates on alliance formation, securitisation and media framing in authoritarian systems. It examines how North Korean state media not only reflects but actively stabilises strategic alignment with Russia and considers the implications of this discursive shift for understanding partnership durability and flexibility in a polarised international order.

3.1. Strategic Partnerships and Media Framing in a Polarised Order

The findings reveal a clear shift in North Korean state media from portraying Russia as a routine diplomatic partner in 2015 to framing it as a strategic and ideological ally by 2025. This transformation reflects a broader reconfiguration of how Pyongyang narrates its place within an increasingly polarised international system.

Most notably, Russia is presented less as a transactional partner and more as a moral ally. DPRK media emphasises shared values, i.e. anti-imperialism, sovereignty and resistance to external pressure, over material cooperation, thus framing alignment with Russia as principled and long-term rather than opportunistic. Where political legitimacy is closely mediated through official discourse, such shifts help stabilise foreign policy choices by rendering them domestically legitimate. By embedding Russia within narratives of “common struggle” and “comradeship”, state media anchors the partnership within the regime’s ideological universe.

From a security studies perspective, the narrative roles assigned to Russia are equally significant. By depicting Russia as both helper and brother-in-arms, DPRK media mitigates the asymmetry inherent in alliances between weaker and stronger states. Russia is never framed as a patron; instead, the relationship is narrated horizontally, as cooperation between equals. This reflects what Myers identifies as a core feature of North Korean ideology: a strong emphasis on dignity, autonomy and resistance to subordination, even vis-à-vis nominal allies (Myers 2010). Media discourse thus functions as a form of status management, allowing Pyongyang to preserve sovereignty while aligning closely with a major military power.

The analysis also shows how manufactured threat and manufactured friendship operate in tandem. Abstract references to “hostile forces”, rather than explicit naming, sustain a sense of external siege that renders alignment with Russia natural and necessary. This mirrors securitisation dynamics, in which threat construction legitimises extraordinary alignments. Within this framing, the DPRK-Russia partnership appears not as a strategic choice among alternatives, but as the logical outcome of a world divided into opposing camps.

Finally, storytelling strategies such as temporal compression and silencing contribute to portraying the partnership as stable and inevitable. By linking past, present and future through notions of inherited tradition and by omitting costs, controversy or disagreement, DPRK media reduces the perceived risks of alignment while narrowing rhetorical flexibility vis-à-vis the West.

Taken together, these findings suggest that North Korean state media does not merely reflect closer DPRK-Russia ties but actively consolidates a strategic worldview in which alignment with Russia is morally justified, historically grounded and security-enhancing. For scholars of security and alliance politics, this underscores the value of media discourse as an early indicator of strategic orientation in authoritarian systems.

3.2. Future Trajectories and Alliance Flexibility

The elevation of Russia as a moral and strategic ally should be read against North Korea’s post-Hanoi recalibration: after the 2019 DPRK-U.S. summit collapse, sustained dialogue with the United States effectively ended, lowering the diplomatic costs of overt alignment with Russia

compared to 2015. In alliance-theoretical terms, the media framing signals movement from hedging toward clearer alignment under heightened threat.

Yet the durability of this discursive alignment is not guaranteed. Its intensity is tightly tied to wartime polarisation; de-escalation in Ukraine or shifts in Russia's global posture could prompt a more pragmatic recalibration. China remains a key variable: while ties with Beijing are affirmed, China is not consistently framed as unequivocally anti-U.S., making relative Russia-China emphasis sensitive to Sino-U.S. dynamics. Finally, South Korea is framed as part of a hostile U.S.-led bloc, consistent with Pyongyang's recent shift away from inter-Korean unity toward treating the ROK as a separate adversarial state.

Conclusions

This paper has demonstrated that North Korean state media offers critical insight into how Pyongyang interprets and legitimises its evolving relationship with Russia. A comparative analysis of 2015 and 2025 media content reveals a clear narrative shift: Russia is no longer portrayed as a peripheral diplomatic partner, but as a strategic and ideological ally embedded in North Korea's vision of a polarised world order. Media discourse frames DPRK-Russia cooperation not as ad hoc or transactional, but as a principled partnership rooted in shared confrontation with the West.

Three core conclusions emerge. First, the portrayal of Russia has become strongly ideological. By embedding the partnership in narratives of *moral righteousness*, *historical continuity* and *common struggle*, DPRK media incorporates Russia into the regime's domestic legitimacy framework. This suggests a level of commitment that is rhetorically difficult to reverse. Second, the use of layered narrative strategies, combining discursive functions, character roles and storytelling techniques, demonstrates a deliberate effort to naturalise the partnership as enduring and inevitable. Russia is cast simultaneously as *comrade*, *validator* and *strategic counterpart*, reinforcing an image of equal and sovereign alignment. Third, the *construction of friendship* operates alongside the *construction of threat*. By portraying the international environment as sharply polarised and hostile, state media presents alignment with Russia as both necessary and justified.

For security and international relations scholarship, these findings underline the value of state media analysis as an indicator of strategic orientation in systems where official discourse plays a central political role. In the DPRK case, discursive shifts toward Russia precede and accompany tangible policy developments, suggesting that propaganda plays a preparatory and stabilising role in alliance formation. Understanding how North Korea narrates its friendships and enemies therefore remains essential for interpreting its strategic behavior and anticipating future alignments.

North Korean state media does not merely reflect the deepening DPRK-Russia relationship; it actively contributes to constructing it as an ideological alliance. In Pyongyang, alliance politics is not only practised through diplomacy and arms, but narrated into existence through state discourse. This underscores the importance of reading North Korean media as a strategic signal, rather than dismissing it as mere propaganda.

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