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## North Korea allies: Who is on Kim Jong-un's side?

*Tensions between North Korea and the US continue to escalate, leading to fears that conflict could break out between the two countries. But does Kim Jong-un have any allies to count on?*

Reiss Smith

April 11, 2017

North Korea has promised that it will retaliate “by powerful force of arms” after the US deployed a Navy aircraft carrier into the Sea of Japan.

Kim Jong-un's state-owned news agency KCNA quoted the foreign ministry as saying: “We will hold the US wholly accountable for the catastrophic consequences to be entailed by its outrageous actions.

“The DPRK is ready to react to any mode of war desired by the US.”

US President Donald Trump ordered the show of force after he held “extensive discussions around the dangerous situation in North Korea” during talks with Chinese President Xi Jinping last week.

Secretary of State Rex Tillerson said Mr Trump and Mr Xi agreed that “action has to be taken” in response to Mr Kim's despot regime. Here is a look at North Korea's few remaining allies.

China

North Korea has historically enjoyed strong links with China, its neighbour to the north and the west. But since Mr Kim took power in 2011, the relationship has cooled.

Mr Xi is said to have a low opinion of Mr Kim and his nuclear weapons programme. Beijing has repeatedly asked Pyongyang to cease its nuclear tests and ballistic missile launches in vain.

In February North Korean state media accused Beijing of “dancing to the tune of the US” and “styling itself as a big power” after China suspended all coal imports from North Korea for the rest of the year.

“Its recent measures are, in effect, tantamount to the enemies' moves to bring down the social system,” the report said.

Beijing said that the ban was designed to enforce UN sanctions aimed at ending Mr Kim's nuclear weapons programme, but China has stopped short of blocking food and energy supplies to North Korea.

China has traditionally been close to North Korea, but the relationship has cooled under Xi Jinping

China supplies a large and essential portion of the North Korea's supplies, and could apply "excruciating pressure" to its neighbour, according to Ted Galen Carpenter, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute.

### **North Korea state could begin to unravel**

Ted Galen Carpenter

"Such a course would require China to incur tremendous risks, and Chinese policymakers are understandably reluctant to do so," Mr Carpenter wrote.

"They have a number of plausible worries about taking such actions. One is that the North Korean state could begin to unravel. At a minimum, that would mean a massive flow of refugees into China.

"Indeed, given the landmines and other massive military impediments along both sides of the Demilitarised Zone separating the two Koreas, it would be easier for refugees to flee to China than to South Korea."

Inside North Korea: The pictures Kim Jong-un doesn't want you to see

Mon, April 10, 2017

Since 2008, photographer Eric Lafforgue ventured to North Korea six times. Thanks to digital memory cards, he was able to save photos that was forbidden to take inside the segregated state

Russia

Russia's relations with the US are at their worst since the end of the Cold War, its foreign ministry has said, so it comes as no surprise that Moscow has remained silent on the current US-North Korea situation.

North Korea shares a narrow north-eastern border with Russia, and the two nations have been close allies since the Cold War.

Last year Russia warned North Korea that its continued nuclear threats could lead to international military force being used against the hermit regime, after Pyongyang threatened to "annihilate" the US and South Korea.

"We consider it to be absolutely impermissible to make public statements containing threats to deliver some 'preventive nuclear strikes' against opponents," Moscow said.

“Pyongyang should be aware of the fact that in this way the DPRK will become fully opposed to the international community and will create international legal grounds for using military force against itself in accordance with the right of a state to self-defence enshrined in the United Nations Charter.”

The statement was interpreted by many as a generic warning rather than a promise of Russian intervention.

Moscow also took the opportunity to criticise a joint US-South Korea military exercise which it said put “unprecedented military and political pressure on Pyongyang”.

In 2015 Russia and North Korea declared a “year of friendship” to deepen economic and political ties.

It was announced that Mr Kim would visit Russian President Vladimir Putin to mark the 70th anniversary of the end of the Second World War. But the trip was later cancelled due to “internal Korean affairs”.

Three years earlier, Moscow agreed to write off \$10 billion of North Korea’s Soviet-era debt.

Putin has ordered a snap inspection of his National Guard to make sure the troops are ready for action

## Bulgaria

North Korea made an alliance with Bulgaria when it was under communist rule in 1948, a signed a bilateral cooperation agreement in 1970.

Bulgaria is now Mr Kim’s only ally in Europe, however last month Sofia pledged that it will take “all necessary measures” to implement UN sanctions against North Korea.

Restrictions were introduced on coal, iron and iron ore originating from North Korea, and the number of staff at North Korea’s embassy in Bulgaria was reduced.

## Benin

Benin is another former communist state with ties to North Korea. In 2013, North Korean state media quoted ex-President of Benin, Thomas Boni Yayim, describing relations between North Korea and Benin as “excellent ones of friendship and tradition”.