

## RUSSIAN AND DPRK MILITARY COOPERATION IN UKRAINE – A WIN-WIN?

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In recent years, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) and Russia have strengthened bilateral ties through several strategic agreements, which has seen a deepening of military, political, and economic cooperation. This new partnership drew global attention when Vladimir Putin and Kim Jong-Un met for a summit in Russia in 2023. It is becoming increasingly obvious that the 2023 summit discussions included more than just the supply of military material to Russia.

The arms deal marked the beginning of an increasingly more ambitious military cooperation,

with the DPRK providing artillery shells, missiles, and other military supplies to support Russia's ongoing war in Ukraine. This deal has allowed Russia to make up for its military shortages and highlights Pyongyang's key role in sustaining Russian military operations in Ukraine.<sup>1</sup>

In June 2024, Putin reciprocated by visiting Pyongyang, culminating in the signing of the "DPRK-Russia Treaty on Comprehensive Strategic Partnership", which the North Korean Minister of Foreign Affairs hailed as an "unbreakable unity".<sup>2</sup> This agreement formalizes further military ties,

particularly in expanding cooperation from simple arms supplies to a broader defensive alliance that could involve direct military support if one of them is attacked. The agreement was unanimously ratified by the State Duma, the lower house of the Russian parliament, on October 24, with the upper house expected to follow.<sup>3</sup>

In early August 2024, Ukraine launched a significant offensive in the Kursk region in Western Russia which may have prompted the activation of the DPRK-Russia Strategic Partnership Agreement and triggered the DPRK's deployment of troops to Russia. The involvement of foreign military personnel represents a significant escalation and shift in the conflict, further complicating the geopolitical balance internationally as more actors become directly involved.<sup>4</sup>

It remains unclear what the exact composition of the North Korean military deployed to Russia is, but it is likely that it ranges from different types of support units, from military construction units, special forces, lower ranks to commanders and flag officers. Military technicians and engineers were sent to Russia to support missile launches and assist in targeting Ukraine with ballistic missiles already last year. The North Korean engineers are also said to be engaged in constructing fortifications, railways, and other military infrastructure in occupied territories in order to strengthen Russian positions.<sup>5</sup> This reflects a multifaceted support role in the ongoing conflict. Some analyses claim that some of these units, described as special forces, likely consist of elite North Korean soldiers with high operational capabilities. Others claim that North Korean troops may have a limited military utility and be used more as cannon fodder by Russia, as noted by DPRK expert Edward Howell at Oxford University.<sup>6</sup>

South Korean intelligence has, similarly, claimed that Russian navy ships transferred 1,500 North Korean special operations forces to Vladivostok for training, equipping them with Russian military uniforms, weapons, and forged Russian ID cards to

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conceal their nationality – another example of hybrid tactics. All in all, this would be the North Korean army’s first large-scale participation in a foreign war.<sup>7</sup> Despite Russia denying involvement, with Dmitry Peskov dismissing these claims as ‘fake news’, Kyiv has released a video showing North Korean recruits lining up to collect military fatigues, confirming reports of North Korean involvement in the war.<sup>8</sup> On October 28, a South Korean delegation briefed the North Atlantic Council and NATO’s Indo-Pacific partners on DPRK military support in the Ukraine war. Intelligence reports have confirmed that North Korean troops have been deployed to western Russia, including the Kursk region.<sup>9</sup>

Combined, all these recent developments and leaked intelligence reports reveal a deepening military collaboration between Russia and North Korea which poses several risks and benefits to

both countries and new challenges to the Western alliance against Russia's war in Ukraine.

## **Mutual Gains: Strategic Benefits for North Korea and Russia**

The North Korean involvement in the Russia-Ukraine war highlights the strategic and military convergences of the DPRK and Russia.

For the DPRK, sending troops or providing military support to Russia offers several advantages. Firstly, its participation brings an opportunity to gain exposure to and knowledge from modern combat operations, which they have largely been absent from since the Korean War. The war in Ukraine has become a testing ground for the use of advanced technologies such as drones, electronic warfare, and precision weapons, from which the North Korean army can gain valuable insight and knowledge. One such technology is sophisticated surveillance technologies, ranging from one-person operated drones to sophisticated satellite technologies (e.g. the ICEEYE SAR system) which provide improved real-time intelligence and situational awareness

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using complex sensor networks. According to Lim Eul-Chul, professor at the Institute for Far Eastern Studies in Seoul, joining the war would allow the DPRK to test different weapons and gain real-world combat experience and training which can be useful in operational preparation, making the North Korean army more effective in future engagements.<sup>10</sup>

Additionally, working alongside Russian forces could improve their interoperability, tactical and strategic coordination, and prepare them for potential future joint missions. This experience is not just about combat, but also about understanding complex logistics, communications, and command structures used by a foreign power.<sup>11</sup>

Beyond military advantages, the political benefits to Pyongyang are significant. North Korea's military support to Russia strengthens its bilateral strategic partnerships, seen in the recent formalization of the DPRK-Russia Strategic Partnership. This cooperation also solidifies political ties, potentially providing the DPRK with increased leverage over the United States and the Republic of Korea (ROK) in future diplomatic negotiations. By extension, the partnership strengthens the anti-democratic axis and indirectly China's position.<sup>12</sup> For China, a strong alliance with Russia and North Korea means added regional support and a more unified front against U.S. influence in East Asia. Domestically, the North Korean government can justify involvement in the war in Ukraine as an act of solidarity with a historical ally, fostering national pride by drawing parallels to Kim Il-Sung's cooperation with the Soviet Union during the Second World War, presenting the DPRK as a loyal and trustworthy supporter of its allies.<sup>13</sup> A potential Russian victory with the help of North Korea, in the wake of a new unification policy, also provides Kim Jong-Un with an opportunity to claim victory over the West and strengthen support for the regime among the population. Furthermore, this cooperation offers long-term benefits through the possibility of reciprocal aid. By supporting Russia, North Korea could in return ask for military, economic, or logistical assistance in the

future, particularly if conflicts arise on the Korean Peninsula. Recent reports suggest that North Korea is already seeking Russian help to advance its spy satellite program, highlighting a mutually beneficial structure to this partnership.<sup>14</sup>

For Russia, the presence of North Korean soldiers on the front lines has some advantages as well. Firstly, it can alleviate some of the strain on Russia's stretched military resources. Unlike hastily recruited conscripts or prisoners, North Korean troops are well trained, and they could improve the quality of manpower on the front lines. This reduces the need for constant mobilization efforts within Russia, which has significantly strained its economy and society, to a certain degree.<sup>15</sup>

As mentioned, the deployment reflects a more ambitious partnership and operationalizes parts of the Strategic Partnership between the two countries. The partnership goes beyond immediate combat needs, establishing a legal framework for long-term cooperation, which could prove beneficial in future conflicts or geopolitical confrontations. Strengthening ties with the DPRK allows Russia to counterbalance American influence in multiple regions, particularly in the Asia-Pacific, and clearly grants Russia a role in any diplomatic initiative related to the conflict on the Korean Peninsula. This expanded network of alliances complicates Western strategic planning by forcing the U.S. and its allies to address threats on multiple fronts. For example, if North Korea becomes more capable due to Russian technological support, it could escalate tensions in East Asia, drawing American resources away from Europe. This kind of multi-regional front could provide Russia with a strategic edge, pressuring the U.S. and its allies to stretch their resources across diverse areas.<sup>16</sup>

North Korean direct military involvement in the Russia-Ukraine war highlights some strategic and military synergies between the DPRK and Russia. However, despite these advantages, the partnership also comes with several significant risks for both.

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### **Shared Risks: Potential Pitfalls for North Korea and Russia**

In addition to the general risk of the conflict in Ukraine escalating as more actors become involved, the involvement of North Korean military personnel in Russia's warfare also poses several political, economic, and military risks to the leaders in Pyongyang and Moscow.

For North Korea, there are several domestic and international risks involved in sending troops to fight in Ukraine and Western Russia. Although the exact role of North Korean soldiers fighting for Russia is still unclear, the possibility of troops becoming ‘cannon fodder’<sup>17</sup> for Russia poses challenges for Kim to domestically justify potential large-scale deaths of North Korean military personnel. This claim is supported by the challenges of integrating North Korean soldiers into the Russian army, most obvious due to lack of combined training, the language barrier, and doctrinal and tactical differences. Depending on how many soldiers North Korea sends to Russia and the exact tasks for these units, Pyongyang risks potentially hundreds, maybe even thousands, of North Korean troops being killed

in combat. Furthermore, Kim risks sending troops that are not as effective in real combat as expected due to a variety of reasons, ranging from poor training, inadequate equipment, bad leadership, to a lack of combat experience. Without a strong narrative to convince the domestic population of the necessity of supporting Russia with troops, it may cause challenges for Kim Jong-un to justify the risk of large-scale loss of life. He risks losing internal support for his commitment to support Russia, in the long run even undermining the legitimacy of his leadership.

Another risk for Pyongyang is the possible growth of dissent and ideological contamination as its troops are exposed to external information that may influence their perception of North Korean society. Combined, the risk of losing soldiers in combat, of dissent and ideological contamination among the North Korean troops can potentially threaten Kim's regime since it relies on the absolute support of the

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KPA, on strict top-down control of access to open media for its population, and especially the military. However, the limited number of troops that have so far been dispatched suggests that North Korea is being cautious and calculative as not to risk large-scale dissent. Pertinent to the risk of ideological contamination, North Korea also faces the risk of troops deserting and seeking asylum in Ukraine or the West or troops being taken as prisoners of war, which risks the leaking of intelligence.<sup>18</sup>

Internationally, Pyongyang's move to send soldiers to help Russia fight Ukraine could see more sanctions imposed on North Korea and its international reputation even further deteriorate. However, this likely matters very little to Kim and Putin, whose countries are both already heavily sanctioned and alienated.<sup>19</sup> For North Korea, further sanctions by the West is unlikely to have a significant impact since it has, during decades of being sanctioned due to its nuclear weapons program, managed to overcome and circumvent sanctions.

The presence of North Korean troops fighting for Russia in Ukraine also poses risks to Moscow, not least increased economic and diplomatic isolation. Russia, being more dependent on the West than North Korea has ever been, is susceptible to further sanctioning by the international community, which could impact its already weakened economy.<sup>20</sup> In the long term, Russia also risks alienating itself further and damaging its limited international reputation, strengthening the impression that Russia is an untrustworthy country.

An additional risk for Moscow is different counteractions from the West and from South Korea. Inviting and accepting North Korean soldiers to fight in support of Russia more or less invalidates Russia's own position that the West cannot and should not contribute to Ukraine with troops, strengthening the arguments of lifting some of the many caveats on the use of Western military equipment. South Korea could change its currently very restrictive policy on military support to Ukraine and allow for

direct support to Ukraine with weapons. It further signals a weakness of Russia, something the military leadership in Russia may not welcome.

In sum, the risks for North Korea in sending troops for combat in a war in Eastern Europe are likely more than the risks for Russia, but the rewards are also likely larger. The outstanding questions regarding North Korean troop numbers, composition, and detailed tasks still leave room for uncertainties regarding many of the risks and benefits to both countries. It remains to be seen who will gain the most, but this development has significantly changed the game, and will have major regional and global geopolitical implications, and does appear to be a win-win situation for both countries.

### **Broader Implications: Global Impact of DPRK-Russia Relations**

The new level of cooperation between Russia and the DPRK poses direct challenges for Ukraine, but more significantly for the United States and the Western alliance, as it marks yet another milestone in an effort to challenge the current world order and to strengthen the anti-democratic axis. However, the deployment of North Korean troops to Russia does not come as a surprise since North Korea – together with Iran and China – has been openly supporting Russia since February 2022 and follows a trajectory of warming relations between Moscow and Pyongyang. Several high level visits between Pyongyang and Moscow, culminating in Putin’s visit to Pyongyang in June 2024, have pointed to and laid the groundwork for what we are seeing now. The timing of the deployments is not a big surprise with the increase in Russian casualties, the U.S. Presidential election and the ongoing wars in the Middle East providing the perfect opportunity.

It remains unknown what tasks the North Korean soldiers will be assigned and how they will be integrated into the Russian forces and commanded. The Korean People’s Army (KPA) will benefit more significantly from being engaged in real combat

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than if they are only being deployed for support roles in rear areas. We also do not know if this is a “one-time off” deployment or if it will be a rotational deployment, possibly even the start of larger formations being sent to Russia. The response from South Korea and the Western alliance will impact how the conflict develops – a strong and swift response may prompt Russia and the DPRK to reconsider any additional forces or deployments. With North Korean soldiers now supporting Russia, this war has shifted from a conflict between two nations to a more internationalized struggle and highlights how important Asian security is in European security considerations. This ought to initiate a serious discussion in NATO, within the EU system, and among other capitals – notably Seoul – about offering similar direct military support to Ukraine. Not doing this may be viewed as a weakness and a sign of fragmented support for Ukraine allowing President Putin once more to frame the debate and decide the “red lines”.

Evidently, the deployment will impact East Asian security and further increase regional tensions. Calls for increased deployments of U.S. forces to East Asia, more U.S.-ROK exercises, closer ROK-Japan cooperation, and even more resources allocated to

strengthen the ROK's military capability are likely to surface. Of particular interest is the possibility that the troop deployment will increase Russia's support of North Korea's nuclear and missile programs. This could intensify domestic discussions in South Korea on developing a national nuclear capability, something that would have profound implication for regional stability, non-proliferation and nuclear policies in general.

The resumption of much needed diplomatic dialogue between North Korea and South Korea needs to be re-examined in light of recent developments. As long as Russia is not defeated on the battlefield, Pyongyang is unlikely to resume any dialogue on de-nuclearization, and other types of diplomatic engagement with North Korea will come at a "higher price".

The current numbers of KPA troops being deployed to Russia is unlikely to have a significant effect on the overall trajectory of the war in Ukraine. However, if North Korean forces are concentrated to a small portion of the frontlines – like the Kursk region as indicated by recent reports – and additional North Korean forces are deployed, it could have a real impact on the ground. The support to Russia will somewhat reduce the strain on Russia's military in replacing and rotating combat units with high casualties and will make calls for mobilization less urgent. It is unlikely that the current troop levels deployed will affect the DPRK's national readiness. The estimated approximately 10,000 soldiers being deployed to Russia out of an army of more than 1 million is a very small and inconsequential number.

Another implication of the troop deployment is the implicit message that in the event of a major crisis on the Korean Peninsula, Russia may support the DPRK with Russian military units. Even though the Strategic Partnership Treaty from June 2024 already included provisions for such support, the recent developments may increase the likelihood of Russian support with combat troops to North

Korea. For the U.S.-ROK alliance, specifically the Combined Forces Command (CFC), this adds extra uncertainty in both the overall threat assessment and operational planning.

Finally, one area where information still is very fragmented is whether the troop deployments came after a Russian request, from a DPRK proposal or something that developed over time. If the North Korean troops deployed to Russia came after a clear request from Moscow, this would give North Korea added leverage in negotiating support from Russia.

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## Endnotes

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