



North Korea Joins Russia's War Against Ukraine: Operational and Strategic Implications in Ukraine and Northeast Asia

Karolina Hird, Daniel Shats, and Alison O'Neil

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Overview:

North Korea has deployed a contingent of troops to Russia in support of Russia's war in Ukraine —the latest development in intensified cooperation between the two countries since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. The Kremlin is likely to leverage North Korean manpower to support its ongoing offensive efforts and offset requirements of Russia's domestic force generation capacity. The impacts of the deployment of North Korean troops into the Ukrainian theater of operations extend far beyond the battlefield in Ukraine, however. Pyongyang likely hopes that North Korean military personnel will gain combat experience in the conditions of contemporary war — experience that it may hope to apply to future conflicts it may fight. The alignment between North Korea and Russia poses the distinct possibility of threatening the long-term stability of the Korean Peninsula and the broader Asia-Pacific region.

Key takeaways:

- **The implications of a long-term alignment between Russia and North Korea extend far beyond the battlefield in Ukraine and may have long-term impacts on the stability of the Korean Peninsula and Asia-Pacific region.**
- **The war in Ukraine will change the character of all future wars, and Pyongyang has evidently identified this fact as a vital learning opportunity for its forces. North Korea's military has not experienced large-scale conventional combat since 1953 and understands that its doctrine is unprepared to fight in a modern war, especially against a sophisticated adversary such as South Korea.**
- **North Korea likely hopes that its forces will have the opportunity to refine offensive doctrine, test their weapons systems against a Western-provisioned adversary, gain command and control experience, and learn how to operate drones and electronic warfare (EW) systems on the modern battlefield. Pyongyang likely hopes that any skills its troops learn in the Ukraine war will give it an offensive edge in future conflicts, including on the Korean Peninsula.**
- **The actual ability of North Korean forces to absorb, disseminate, and institutionalize lessons learned on the battlefield is entirely contingent on how the Russian command uses North Korean manpower. If Russia uses North Korean personnel as "cannon fodder," the casualties that North Korean troops are sure to accrue will undermine whatever battlefield lessons Pyongyang hopes to learn.**

- **North Korea may be using its increasing alignment with Russia to reduce its reliance on the People's Republic of China (PRC), therefore reducing Beijing's leverage over the North Korean regime. A reduction of PRC leverage over North Korea will likely reduce the stability of the Korean Peninsula and endanger the broader Asia-Pacific region, because the PRC uses its leverage to restrain North Korea's aggression.**
- **North Korea's recent partnership agreement and strengthening relations with Russia may help it advance the development of its nuclear weapons program, even if Russian aid does not take the form of direct technical assistance to the program.**
- **Pyongyang may be trying to secure Russian defense commitments in the case of a conflict on the Korean Peninsula as part of the larger *quid pro quo* for committing such a large contingent of North Korean troops to an entirely foreign conflict. The 2024 Russia-North Korea mutual defense agreement may allow Russia to avoid committing troops to an inter-Korean war, however.**
- **North Korea's defense agreement with Russia increases the credibility and effectiveness of its threats and coercion toward South Korea.**

Current State of Play:

North Korean soldiers have deployed into combat in Russia's Kursk Oblast alongside Russian forces. Ukraine's Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) reported on October 24 that the first units of North Korean personnel deployed to Kursk Oblast on October 23, following a few weeks of training at various military bases in Russia's Primorsky and Khabarovsk krais, Amur Oblast, and the Republic of Buryatia.[1] The GUR's October 24 statement follows recent South Korean and Ukrainian intelligence reports warning of the rapid deployment and training of tens of thousands of North Korean soldiers in Russia's Far East and mounting visual evidence of North Korean troops training and assembling at Russian military bases. South Korea's National Intelligence Service (NIS) reported on October 18 that North Korea deployed a first wave of approximately 1,500 special forces personnel to Russia between October 8 and October 13, sharing satellite imagery purportedly showing North Korean soldiers gathering at Russian military facilities in Ussuriysk, Primorsky Krai and Khabarovsk, Khabarovsk Krai.[2] South Korea's *Yonhap News* reported on October 18 that the NIS assessed after a closed-door emergency security meeting with South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol that North Korea decided to send four brigades totaling 12,000 personnel to Russia, and the NIS warned on October 25 that a second wave of 1,500 personnel will soon depart for Russia.[3] Ukraine's Center for Strategic Communications released footage on October 18 reportedly showing North Korean troops receiving their equipment at the Sergeevka training ground in Primorsky Krai, and additional social media footage published in subsequent days purportedly showed North Korean troops arriving and training at military bases in eastern Russia.[4] GUR Head Lieutenant General Kyrylo Budanov noted to the *Economist* on October 22 that the total North Korean contingent of 12,000 personnel includes 500 officers and three generals.[5] The Pentagon and the White House confirmed on October 23 that the US has evidence that thousands of North Korean soldiers have deployed to Russia.[6] Russian President Vladimir Putin failed to deny the

reports on October 24, and in fact appears to have obliquely affirmed them, responding to a media question on October 24 about satellite imagery purportedly of North Korean troops at Russian training grounds, remarking that "photos are a serious thing" and "reflect something."^[7]



North Korea and Russia have somewhat diverged in their official responses to news of North Korea joining the war on Russia's behalf. North Korea has so far denied all evidence outright. A North Korean representative to the United Nations General Assembly's First

Committee on Disarmament and International Security dismissed reports on October 21 of North Korean troops in Russia as "groundless stereotyped rumors aimed at smearing the image of North Korea and undermining the legitimate, friendly, and cooperative relations" between Russia and North Korea.[8] North Korean Vice Foreign Minister Kim Jong-gyu told North Korean state-controlled Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) on October 25 that news about North Korean troops in Russia is all "rumors," but that any potential deployment of North Korean troops to Russia would be "in accordance with international law." [9] Kremlin officials have attempted to claim that any cooperation between Russia and North Korea is legitimate and not aimed at other states but have not explicitly denied the reports.[10] The Kremlin in particular has repeatedly emphasized the supposed legality of Russia's cooperation with North Korea, likely in order to manage relations with South Korea and prevent Seoul from directly sending direct military aid to Ukraine. North Korea's more explicit denial may reflect a desire to avoid additional or increased international sanctions against Pyongyang.

The evolution of Russia-North Korea relations, 2022 to present:

The growing requirements on Russia's ability to sustain its war in Ukraine have opened new avenues for cooperation between Moscow and Pyongyang.

The Soviet Union was the first country to recognize North Korea in 1948 and supported North Korea during the Korean War. The Soviet Union continued to back North Korea economically and militarily throughout the 1960s, but Communist Party General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev began opening to South Korea diplomatically in the 1980s.[11] The Soviet Union established diplomatic relations with South Korea in 1990, driving a further wedge between Moscow and Pyongyang.[12] Russian President Vladimir Putin attempted to re-establish a more solid relationship with North Korea upon his accession to the presidency in the early 2000s and visited Kim Jong-il in Pyongyang in 2000, framing his outreach as a recognition of the common anti-Western values that both Russia and North Korea share.[13] Russia supported United Nations Security Council (UNSC) sanctions against North Korea over North Korean nuclear weapons and missile programs between 2006 to 2017 but has largely reversed course since the start of the war in 2022.[14]

September 2022: US intelligence first warned of a burgeoning relationship between North Korea and Russia, reporting that Russia began buying "millions" of rockets and artillery shells from North Korea to support its invasion of Ukraine.[15]

November 2022: US National Security Spokesperson John Kirby stated that North Korea began "covertly shipping a significant number of artillery shells" to Russia.[16]

December 2022: Kirby reported that US intelligence confirmed that North Korea had completed a delivery of rockets and missiles to the Wagner Group, for which the Wagner Group directly paid.[17]

July 2023: Former Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu visited North Korea to take part in ceremonial events for the 70-year anniversary of the end of the Korean War.[18]

September 2023: The White House warned that high-level military cooperation talks between Moscow and Pyongyang were "actively advancing," ahead of reporting that North Korean dictator Kim Jong-un planned to travel to Russia to meet Putin.[19] Kim arrived

in Primorsky Krai on September 12, 2023, his first known trip outside of North Korea since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020.[20] Putin met Kim at the Vostochny Cosmodrome in Amur Oblast on September 13 and reported that he and Kim had a "frank exchange of views on the situation in the region and on bilateral relations." [21] Putin also falsely claimed that Russian-North Korean cooperation was consistent with international restrictions on military-technical exchanges with North Korea, likely out of concerns that North Korean artillery shipments would trigger secondary sanctions against Russia.[22] Kim then met Shoigu at the Knevichi Airfield in Vladivostok, Primorsky Krai on September 16, where Kim viewed several pieces of aviation and missile technology, including Tu-22MS, Tu-95MS, and Tu-160 nuclear-capable strategic bombers; Su-25SM3, Su-30SM, and Su-34 fighter-bombers; a MiG-31I combat aircraft equipped with Kinzhal aeroballistic missiles; the *Marshal Shaposhnikov* Udaloy-class frigate; a Uranus anti-ship missile system; and Kalibr cruise missiles.[23] Kim met with Russian military engineers at the Far Eastern Federal University on September 17.[24] Primorsky Krai Governor Oleg Kozhemyako gifted Kim a military vest, a loitering munition of unspecified variety, and an unspecified type of long-range reconnaissance drone, which Kim transported back to North Korea, in an apparent direct violation of United Nations sanctions.[25]

October 2023: Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov met with North Korean Foreign Minister Choe Son-hui in Pyongyang.[26] Lavrov stated that relations between Russia and North Korea have reached a "qualitatively new, strategic level." [27]

The US Mission to the UN announced on October 13 that North Korea had shipped over 1,000 containers of military equipment and ammunition to Russia in the first few weeks of October 2023.[28]

November 2023: South Korean lawmaker Yoo Sang-bum told reporters that the NIS found that North Korea had made 10 weapons shipments totaling around one million artillery rounds, to Russia between August and November 2023.[29] *Yonhap* reported on November 2 that the South Korean Joint Chiefs of Staff estimated that North Korea sent about 2,000 containers of military equipment and munitions from North Korea's Rajin Port to Vladivostok between August and November, likely containing about 200,000 122mm artillery shells or one million 152mm artillery shells.[30] South Korean military sources reported that North Korea was likely sending an unspecified number and type of short-range ballistic missiles to Russia as of early November 2023.[31]

Former South Korean Defense Minister Shin Won-sik reported that Russia helped North Korea resolve engine problems to enable the launch of a reconnaissance satellite on November 22, which followed two failed launch attempts. [32] North Korea claimed that the satellite took pictures of US military installations in Guam.[33]

December 2023: Kirby confirmed that Russian forces launched at least one North Korean ballistic missile into Ukraine on December 30.[34]

January 2024: A North Korean delegation headed by North Korean Foreign Minister Choe Son-hui arrived in Moscow for discussions and negotiations with Lavrov and the Russian Foreign Ministry.[35] Lavrov thanked Choe for North Korea's support for Russia's war.[36]

February 2024: Unidentified American-allied intelligence officials told the *New York Times* that Russia released 9 million dollars of frozen North Korean assets from an unspecified Russian financial institution back to North Korea and may be helping North Korea access international banking networks.[37]

March 2024: North Korea-focused open-source investigative outlet *NKNews* reported on March 11 that a Russian cargo ship returned to North Korea's Rason Port after a month-long pause in traffic between North Korea and Russia, signaling the restart in North Korean arms transfers to Russia.[38]

Russia vetoed an annual UNSC resolution on March 29 that would have renewed the UNSC's panel of experts tasked with investigating North Korean sanctions violations.[39]

June 2024: Putin visited North Korea, signing the Russia-North Korea joint comprehensive partnership agreement with Kim.[40] The agreement notably includes a clause providing for "mutual assistance in the case of aggression" against the signatories.[41] Following the signing of the agreement, both Putin and Kim lauded current Russia-North Korea relations as "historically high."

July 2024: South Korea's *TV Chosun* outlet reported, citing a South Korean government official, that North Korea was preparing to "dispatch a large-scale engineering unit" to occupied Donetsk City, Ukraine, in July.[42] The South Korean official noted that the North Korean engineering personnel would be assisting Russian reconstruction efforts in occupied Donetsk Oblast.

South Korea's Ministry of Unification reported on July 1 that North Korea's Korea Central TV channel switched from transmitting on Chinese satellites to Russian satellites, cutting off Seoul's ability to monitor North Korean television transmissions.[43]

Russian Prosecutor General Igor Krasnov travelled to Pyongyang on July 22 and met with his North Korean counterpart Kim Chol-won.[44] Kim and Krasnov signed a partnership agreement, expanding cooperation into the judicial sphere.[45]

September 2024: Shoigu visited North Korea for the first time in his new role as Russian Security Council Secretary and met with Kim Jong-un.[46]

October 2024: Ukrainian intelligence sources reported to Ukrainian media on October 3 that a Ukrainian strike near occupied Donetsk City killed six North Korean officers and injured three North Korean soldiers, which new South Korean Defense Minister Kim Yong-hyun later confirmed.[47]

Putin notably submitted the text of the June 2024 Russia-North Korea strategic partnership agreement to the Russian State Duma for ratification on October 14, officially codifying the legal basis for the relationship, as well as the mutual defense provision, into Russian law.[48] The Duma ratified the text of the agreement on October 24 amid increased international attention about the reported deployment of North Korean troops to Russia.[49]

Ukrainian, South Korean, and US intelligence and defense officials provided increasing evidence of North Korean troop deployments to Russia in the first few weeks of October. Ukrainian outlets *Suspilne* and *Liga* initially reported on October 15, citing anonymous Ukrainian intelligence sources, that the "Special Buryat Battalion," staffed by 3,000 North Korean personnel, is forming in the Russian Far East as part of the Russian 11th Airborne

(VDV) Brigade.[50] Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky stated on October 22 that Ukraine has intelligence suggesting that Russia is currently training up to two "brigades," comprised of 6,000 North Korean personnel each.[51]

Implications and Forecasts:

The deployment of North Korean troops to Russia emphasizes Putin's continued reliance on pursuing alternative force generation avenues to support the war effort instead of committing to a wider societal mobilization. Putin has continually taken efforts to support the Russian war effort without fully shifting Russian society to a wartime footing, apparently assessing that the domestic costs of ordering another involuntary reserve callup outweigh the benefits and opting instead to heavily rely on crypto and shadow mobilization.[52] When Putin did call up a partial mobilization wave in September 2022, the domestic impacts were immediately evident as hundreds of thousands of Russians fled the country to avoid mobilization.[53] Over the past two years, therefore, Putin and his regime have relied exclusively on finding alternative force generation avenues, particularly by increasing coercive financial incentives for contract service or targeting vulnerable migrant communities.[54] The manpower that can be generated by crypto-mobilization is finite, however, and certain recent developments on the battlefield have introduced increased friction into the delicate recruitment system that the Kremlin has constructed. Ukraine's August 2024 incursion into Kursk Oblast made this issue particularly acute, as the Russian military has suddenly had to reckon with committing manpower and materiel to an entirely new part of the theater.[55] Putin's response to the incursion has been to leverage conscripts and border guards, create new territorial defense units, and redeploy active units away from non-critical frontline positions in Ukraine, consistent with how he has handled managing force generation requirements throughout the war thus far.[56] The use of North Korean troops is therefore an extension of the Kremlin's force generation approach — it allows Russia to build out its fighting force with up to 12,000 fresh personnel (for now) without needing to conduct a socially-costly domestic mobilization and deal with the resulting fall-out.

The Russian command will send North Korean personnel first and foremost to Kursk Oblast, as confirmed by Ukrainian intelligence on October 24.[57] The Kremlin likely views repelling Ukrainian forces from their salient in Kursk Oblast without disrupting other high-priority offensive efforts in Ukraine as an operational-level priority in the immediate term and coming months. Ukrainian Commander-in-Chief General Oleksandr Syrskyi stated that Russia deployed nearly 50,000 personnel from other areas of the theater to Kursk Oblast between August and early October, meaning that Russia has had to weaken other areas of the front in order to re-allocate troops to Kursk.[58] Deploying some portion of the North Korean personnel to Kursk could allow the Russian command to re-allocate Russian personnel back to Ukraine, both to support ongoing offensive operations in Ukraine's east, and to sustain defensive efforts in the north and south. It could alternatively let the Kremlin avoid drawing additional high-quality Russian troops from ongoing offensive efforts in Ukraine. North Korean personnel are unlikely to deploy directly into Ukraine until the Kremlin deems that it has properly responded to the Kursk incursion, both because of the current priority the Kremlin is assigning to regaining its territory and because keeping North Korean troops on Russian soil gives Moscow greater control over the informational effects of using them. Russia could and may use North

Korean soldiers in future operations in Ukraine, however, particularly if their deployment to Kursk is successful.

Pyongyang undoubtedly hopes that its troops will gain vital combat and military-technical experience in the conditions of a contemporary war. Western estimates place the size of the North Korean military (Korean People's Army [KPA]) at 1.2 to 1.3 million active-duty personnel, including around one million active-duty ground forces.^[59] The KPA's Special Operations Forces (KPASOF, of which the South Korean NIS reported at least 1,500 deployed to Russia in the initial October 2024 wave) is estimated to be around 200,000 strong.^[60] The KPA last experienced large-scale conventional combat in 1953.^[61] US military intelligence has assessed that North Korean strategy, doctrine, and tactics for ground operations have remained the same since the 1950s and are predominantly intended to posture against South Korea — a country that has rapidly modernized its own military.^[62] North Korea has previously sent small advisory and specialist groups to foreign conflicts to observe and gain certain technical skills, such as a group of 20 aviation specialists who trained pilots and flew aircraft during the 1973 Yom Kippur War.^[63] Syrian opposition also reported the presence of North Korean militia units fighting on behalf of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in 2016.^[64] These foreign deployments were notably much more limited in size and scope than the reported 12,000 North Koreans deployed to Russia in the current war, however, and the types of conflicts that North Korean specialists previously took part in were notably very different from Russia's war in Ukraine.

The battlefield in Ukraine is a case study in modern war.^[65] The characteristics that define combat in the Ukrainian theater of operations will certainly characterize future wars, as ISW has previously argued.^[66] The US Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) assessed that North Korea "understands that the character of war has changed" since the 1950s and "sees its military as largely unprepared to engage in modern warfare."^[67] Pyongyang therefore certainly sees recent developments in Ukraine as an opportunity to gain practice engaging in modern warfare against Western-provisioned forces, without facing the risks of fighting a war on the Korean Peninsula. The current climate is ideal for North Korea's involvement — Russia and North Korea have gradually deepened their relations since 2022 and created a pseudo-legal groundwork for Pyongyang's direct involvement via the 2024 Russia-North Korea partnership agreement. And North Korea stands to learn much more from Russia's war in Ukraine than it could have learned in Russia's past military commitments in Georgia, Chechnya, Syria, or Ukraine in 2014 due to the nature of the current battlefield. North Korea's military doctrine defines South Korea and the United States as the ultimate adversaries, and the war in Ukraine grants North Korea an unprecedented opportunity to "practice" its doctrine in a battlefield environment that may resemble future conflicts on the Korean Peninsula due to technological and tactical innovations.^[68]

North Korean personnel will have the opportunity to gain experience fighting on battlefields that have become increasingly lethal and complex due to the proliferation of reconnaissance and strike drones and the increased integration of first person-view (FPV) loitering munitions on both the Russian and Ukrainian sides. South Korea's NIS has specifically assessed that North Korea is interested in learning how to pilot drones and integrate drone operations into offensive operations.^[69] North Korean soldiers will have the opportunity to learn how to use electronic warfare (EW), counter-drone, and GPS

jamming measures on the battlefield. DIA's North Korean Military Power assessment noted that North Korea understands that EW is "critical to denying and disrupting enemy command and control," but that North Korea's ability to do so beyond operating GPS jammers near the demilitarized zone (DMZ) has been essentially non-existent.[70]

Combat in Kursk Oblast or potentially in Ukraine will also grant North Korean troops the opportunity to refine their infantry doctrine based on practical on-the-ground experience. The KPA has not had the real-world opportunity to coordinate KPASOF and infantry actions, for example. DIA's North Korean Military Power assessment states that "the modern KPA emphasizes small and large units attacking an objective simultaneously, such as SOF or light infantry attacking the objective from the rear or flank while heavy infantry support with artillery assaults from the front and flanks." [71] South Korea's NIS assessed that the first wave of North Korean troops that will enter combat alongside Russian forces will be the elite "Storm Corps," a special forces unit from North Korea's XI (11th) Corps, which has a reputation for being well-equipped and well-trained.[72] When "Storm Corps" units enter combat alongside Russian forces, they will in theory be able to test out the merits of their training and practice coordinating with Russian infantry forces, potentially providing the grounds on which Pyongyang can later update its ground forces and KPASOF doctrine.

The combat experience that North Korean personnel can gain in combat extends from the most junior infantry foot soldiers up to high-ranking generals. KPA junior non-commissioned officers and enlisted servicemembers will gain real-world combat experience that they have not yet had. North Korean pilots may also gain unique flight experience and competencies to operate Russian aircraft — South Korean network *TV Chosun* published an exclusive report on October 21 stating that North Korea dispatched an unspecified number of fighter pilots to Vladivostok before the deployment of ground troops to Russia in early October.[73] North Korean pilots are trained on Russian Su-25 attack aircraft (which are already part of the KPA Air Force fleet) but will be able to gain hard combat experience if they fly Su-25s in combat missions alongside Russian tactical aviation forces.[74] Pyongyang also likely hopes that its officer cadre and military leadership will have the opportunity to learn critical command and control lessons during combat operations. GUR Head Budanov noted that North Korea deployed over 500 officers and three generals to Russia, and these officers may have the opportunity to learn from Russian officers while refining their own command and control structures in the fact of actual combat.[75] These command lessons will be critical if North Korea tries to organize itself for a future conflict.

The ability of North Korean troops to properly gain, absorb, and disseminate battlefield lessons may be greatly constrained by the way in which Russian command decides to leverage North Korean combat power and by the performance of North Korean troops in combat. The Russian military command has increasingly resorted to infantry-led frontal assault tactics (colloquially referred to as "meat assaults") in operations in Ukraine, leading to high casualty rates among Russian troops that have greatly degraded the quality of the Russian fighting force and inhibited Russia's own ability to learn and integrate battlefield lessons.[76] This assault tactic has also degraded the Russian military's ability to leverage technical and tactical specialists, such as drone operators and "elite" or special forces units, flattening the distinctions between such services and watering down their battlefield effects.[77] If the Russian

command decided to use North Korean personnel in such a manner as "cannon fodder," and not utilize the specialist training of certain North Korean units, the casualties that North Korean troops are sure to accrue will undermine whatever battlefield lessons Pyongyang hopes to learn. It is also worth noting that the exact way in which Russian forces are fighting does not perfectly map onto North Korean ground forces and KPASOF doctrine (as outlined above), so North Korean troops may be limited in their actual ability to put their training to use or fall back on doctrinal conceptions of how wars should be prosecuted. North Korean morale may also contribute to this issue — Ukrainian intelligence alleged that over 18 North Korean soldiers deserted their positions in Russia before even being committed to combat operations.[78]

Cultural and linguistic challenges may also impact the ability of North Korean troops to gain adequate combat experience alongside Russian forces. The GUR released audio intercepts on October 25 indicating that the Russian command will assign one Korean language translator per 30 North Korean troops.[79] The language barrier may hinder the interaction between North Korean and Russian personnel, making the communications issues that already plague Russian combat capabilities even more acute.

Pyongyang may seek to use its increasing alignment with Moscow to reduce its reliance on the People's Republic of China (PRC), thus reducing the PRC's leverage over the Kim regime. The PRC is North Korea's most important partner by far. The heavily sanctioned and impoverished North Korean economy is extremely dependent on trade with the PRC, which accounts for more than 90 percent of North Korea's total imports and exports.[80] The PRC is very likely North Korea's largest source of food aid, though exact numbers are unavailable, and one of its only sources of crude oil.[81] Beijing has also been North Korea's main security guarantor since the Korean War, when Chinese Communist "volunteers" critically intervened to help the North Korean regime escape annihilation and push UN forces back to the 38th parallel.[82] North Korea remains the PRC's only treaty ally, linked by a 1961 mutual defense treaty that they renewed in 2021.[83] The PRC has an interest in maintaining a stable North Korean state as a buffer between its territory and unfriendly military forces, such as the 28,500 US troops stationed in South Korea.[84]

The PRC-DPRK relationship is fraught with mistrust, however, and Pyongyang has often chafed under PRC efforts to reign in its behavior. The PRC hosted the Six Party Talks from 2003 to 2009 with the aim of stopping North Korea's nuclear program.[85] It voted in favor of UN sanctions against North Korea repeatedly until 2022 (though international investigations found it also helped North Korea evade those sanctions).[86] The PRC declined to support North Korea during outbreaks of inter-Korean violence that North Korea initiated, such as an exchange of fire in 2010 that killed people on both sides.[87] North Korea's nuclear brinkmanship in 2017 exposed the limits of the alliance: editorials in the *Global Times*, a semi-official state-owned PRC newspaper, said that Beijing should not militarily intervene if North Korea attacks the United States first and may even allow the US military to bomb North Korean nuclear facilities.[88] Another editorial and various Chinese scholars openly argued that North Korea breached the 1961 treaty and threatened the PRC's security by nuclearizing without consulting the PRC.[89] North Korean state media responded with a rare public criticism of the PRC's "insincerity and betrayal," accusing Beijing of "dancing to the tune of the US." [90] PRC Permanent Representative to the UN Zhang Jun re-affirmed in 2023 that the PRC is

“committed to the denuclearization of the [Korean] peninsula, the peace and stability on the peninsula, and the political settlement of the issue through dialogue.”^[91] Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov sought to capitalize on this PRC-North Korea tension by declaring in September 2024 that North Korean denuclearization is a “closed issue” because Russia understands that North Korea views nuclear weapons as the foundation of its defense.^[92]

North Korea may use improved relations with Russia to reduce the PRC’s leverage over Pyongyang. During the bitter Sino-Soviet Split from the 1960s to 1980s, North Korean leader Kim Il-sung played the PRC and the Soviet Union against each other to secure economic and military aid from both countries while avoiding dependence on either one.^[93] While Sino-Russian relations are more cordial today, building a strong partnership with Russia in trade and defense can help Pyongyang erode Beijing’s near-monopolistic influence over North Korea and enable North Korea to better resist the PRC’s demands. Additionally, the international sanctioning and isolation of Russia since its invasion of Ukraine has made Russia less inclined to abide by Western-led sanctions against other countries.^[94] The PRC, by contrast, relies a great deal on trade with the United States and Europe and is careful not to blatantly flout Western-led sanctions regimes, including those against Russia.^[95] Pyongyang may hope that Russia can provide it with aid that the PRC will not, including military technology and even assistance with its nuclear program.

A reduction of PRC leverage over North Korea brought about by Pyongyang’s partnership with Russia will likely reduce the stability of the Korean Peninsula and endanger the broader Asia-Pacific region. The PRC has primarily used its influence over North Korea to restrain North Korea’s aggression and nuclear weapons development, even though its record of success is mixed. Beijing’s desire to ensure the survival of the North Korean regime has motivated not only its commitment to the bilateral alliance, but also its efforts to keep its “little brother” from provoking a war. By contrast, Russia has much less interest in ensuring stability on the Korean Peninsula and may even wish to use an aggressive North Korea to threaten the United States and capture Western attention. A Russia-backed North Korea may feel more confident in its ability to weather Beijing’s displeasure and thus emboldened to escalate its missile tests and aggression toward South Korea.

North Korea’s agreement and strengthening relations with Russia may also help it advance the development of its nuclear weapons program. The Russia-North Korea agreement that Putin and Kim signed on June 19 includes a provision that the two sides will develop exchange, cooperation, and joint research in science of technology, including space and “peaceful atomic energy.”^[96] Although the agreement does not stipulate that Russia will help North Korea develop missiles or nuclear weapons, Russia has abandoned its past opposition to North Korea’s nuclear program. It vetoed a UN Resolution to tighten sanctions on North Korea in 2022 and another UN Resolution to extend the mandate of the UN sanctions monitoring committee on North Korea in 2024, effectively ending UN sanctions compliance monitoring, as noted above. ^[97] The PRC also vetoed the 2022 resolution and abstained from the 2024 vote.^[98] Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov’s dismissal of North Korean denuclearization as a “closed issue” is emblematic of Russia’s change of attitude since 2022, which could lead to a willingness to directly assist Pyongyang’s nuclear program.

Even an increase in non-nuclear and non-military trade and aid from Russia could facilitate North Korea's nuclear weapons development. Direct transfers of currency can be used to fund whatever the North Korean government wants. A study by the Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom estimated the value of North Korea's current arms deliveries to Russia at between \$1.7 billion and \$5.5 billion.^[99] This is a substantial economic boon for North Korea given that its total GDP was around \$40 billion in 2023, according to South Korean estimates.^[100] A Heritage Foundation report found that "Russia is almost certainly supplying hard currency, which North Korea needs."^[101] and that "this trade of weapons for cash further allows the Kim regime to expand its relationship with existing trading partners, seek new clients that it can support through expanded production lines, and gain access to restricted technologies."^[102] US diplomats have reported North Korean workers working in Russia in 2018 sent up to 80% of their income back to the North Korean state, a practice that the UN later banned.^[103] South Korean newspaper *Chosun* reported that North Korea was still sending workers to Russia in 2024.^[104] Russia has already helped North Korea evade sanctions, for example by setting up a network of financial institutions to secretly facilitate illicit payments.^[105] Non-monetary aid from Russia such as fuel and food can alleviate regime-threatening problems in North Korea and allow the state to redirect resources to other priorities, such as nuclear weapons development. Russian government data showed that the Russian Far East and Siberia exported thousands of tons of flour and corn to North Korea in 2023.^[106]

Pyongyang may be trying to secure Russian defense commitments in the case of a conflict on the Korean Peninsula as part of the larger *quid pro quo* for committing such a large contingent of North Korean troops to an entirely foreign conflict. The mutual defense agreement that North Korea and Russia signed in June stipulates that "in case any one of the two sides is put in a state of war by an armed invasion from an individual state or several states, the other side shall provide military and other assistance with all means in its possession without delay in accordance with Article 51 of the UN Charter and the laws of the DPRK and the Russian Federation."^[107] Pyongyang may hope that the agreement, along with its deployment of troops to help Russia, will ensure that Russia comes to its aid in a future conflict on the Korean Peninsula. North Korea's lessons learned from its deployment to Russia may thus also include improving interoperability with the Russian military for future wars.

North Korea's deployment of troops to Russia is likely an instantiation of the mutual defense agreement (in an ex post facto fashion, since the Kursk operation began before the agreement was ratified) and indicates that cooperation under the agreement may not be limited to defensive wars. North Korea and Russia have both called Russia's invasion of Ukraine a "special military operation" rather than an "invasion" and framed the war as a US proxy war against Russia that the United States initiated. Both countries have also framed Ukrainian attacks on Russian soil as offensive. The North Korean Foreign Ministry called Ukraine's Kursk incursion in August 2024 "an extremely grave terrorist crime" and an "armed invasion of the inviolable territory of Russia."^[108] This description of the Kursk incursion as an "armed invasion" of Russia mirrors language in the agreement and would justify triggering North Korea's mutual defense obligations to Russia. Indeed, North Korea first deployed troops to Kursk months after the agreement was signed, though before Russia's State Duma ratified it. The agreement could be used

to further justify sending North Korean troops into Ukraine with the argument that parts of the Donbas that Russia annexed are Russian land that Ukraine is “invading.” North Korea was one of the first countries to recognize Russia’s annexations in the Donbas in 2022.[109] In a similar vein, North Korea could invoke the agreement to seek Russian aid even in a conflict that Pyongyang starts, by framing its actions as defensive.

It is unclear whether Russia would be willing to send troops to fight North Korea’s enemies on the Korean peninsula, however. The agreement has some caveats that may give Russia leeway to avoid being forced to intervene in a war it does not want to fight. The stipulation that each side shall provide military assistance in accordance with Article 51 of the UN Charter and their own national laws may allow Russia to quibble about what kinds of situations will trigger Russia’s automatic military intervention. This caveat was not present in the 1961 USSR-North Korea treaty.[110] Moscow may argue, as Beijing has done, that it is not obligated to help North Korea in conflicts that Pyongyang initiates. Russia’s stake in the survival of the North Korean regime is much less than that of the PRC, North Korea’s other ally. While the PRC prefers that North Korea refrain from actions that destabilize the region, Russia likely views an aggressive North Korea as a useful way to occupy, distract, and threaten US forces in the Asia-Pacific while Russia pursues more important priorities in Europe. Getting Russia’s own military involved in North Korea’s war would be counterproductive, especially if it means open war with the United States. It is notable that Kim Jong-un described the newly upgraded Russia-North Korea relationship as an “alliance,” while Vladimir Putin stopped short of using that word.[111]

North Korea’s defense agreement with Russia increases the credibility and effectiveness of its threats and coercion toward South Korea. North Korea’s alignment with Russia comes during a period of increasingly hostile rhetoric toward South Korea. Kim announced in January that North Korea would rewrite its constitution to declare South Korea its “principal enemy” and abandon long-held goals for peaceful reunification.[112] In October, North Korea blew up parts of the roads and railroads that connect North and South Korea and announced that it would build additional fortifications near the border.[113] North Korea also threatened to retaliate against South Korea allegedly sending drones into North Korean airspace to drop propaganda leaflets, including in Pyongyang.[114]

North Korea’s alignment with Russia makes its threats and coercion more credible for several reasons. First, gaining a major new ally increases the chance that North Korea could prevail in a war, or at least survive. This will embolden North Korea to pursue riskier behavior. Second, North Korea reducing its economic and military reliance on the PRC will accordingly reduce South Korea’s confidence that the PRC can restrain North Korea’s worse impulses. Third, Russia as a foreign policy actor is much less predictable and less cautious about conflict than the PRC, which will lead to uncertainty about the extent to which Russia may back up North Korean aggression. The PRC has not fought a war since 1979 and strongly prefers not to tie up or lose troops and assets in any conflict that doesn’t serve its primary goals. It has avoided military alliances, besides with North Korea, for that reason. By contrast, Russia has a history of military adventurism and aggression, including military operations in Chechnya, Georgia, Syria, and Ukraine in the last two decades. Rather than restraining North Korea, it may even actively encourage it to militarily confront the South. An increase in the credibility and effectiveness of North

Korea's coercion against South Korea will better enable it to influence the policies of South Korea and its other adversaries in Pyongyang's favor.

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