



202.464.1982 1800 K Street NW

THE PENINSULA

Pyongyang's Dangerous Axis with Moscow

Published October 21, 2024

Author: [Daniel Sneider](#)Category: [North Korea](#)

The evidence of a deepening military axis between North Korea and Russia has been mounting in recent days, causing alarm from Kyiv to Seoul. In the latest development, South Korea's National Intelligence Service (NIS) reported on Friday that some 1,500 North Korean special forces were already sent to the Russian Far East in preparation for deployment to the Ukrainian war front. South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol convened an emergency security meeting, and his office stated that this represents "a significant security threat not only to our country but also to the international community."

Pyongyang's decision to dispatch armed forces to participate in Russia's war efforts, following its massive shipments of arms and ammunition, flows from the security alliance sealed last June during Russian President Vladimir Putin's visit to North Korea. More tantalizing are clues to what Moscow has agreed to provide Pyongyang in return. There, the evidence is less conclusive, but there are reasons to conclude that Russia has abandoned long-held commitments to nuclear non-proliferation and avoidance of nuclear use.

Even more troubling, these developments take place amidst growing tensions along the inter-Korean frontier, fueled by North Korea's decision to formally discard the goal of peaceful reunification. Instead, in a visit to an army headquarters on October 17, Kim Jong-un told troops that any use of force against the South would constitute an act "against the hostile country, not the fellow countrymen."

North Korean Troop and Weapons Deployment

The NIS reports of North Korean troop deployment follow numerous reports from Ukraine of their presence, prompting statements from Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy about their presence. One report claimed that a Ukrainian missile attack killed several North Korean military officials. More recently, Ukraine's Center for Strategic Communication and Information Security released a video that appears to show North Korean troops lining up at a Russian base in the Far East to receive uniforms and other equipment.

So far, however, neither US nor NATO officials have independently confirmed these reports. NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte spoke with President Yoon about the possible dispatch of North Korean troops. "North Korea sending troops to fight alongside Russia in Ukraine would mark a significant escalation," Rutte said.

As reports have pointed out, it is hardly unprecedented for North Korea to dispatch military advisors, or even combatants, to conflicts. The North Koreans did so during the Vietnam War, in support of the Pol Pot regime in Cambodia, to participate in Egyptian combat against Israel during the Yom Kippur War, and recently to fight for the Bashar al-Assad regime during the Syrian civil war.

There is some skepticism, however, about reports that the North Koreans are preparing to dispatch large numbers of forces—10,000 or more—to join the Ukrainian front. That would only take place if Putin is looking for an "immediate and decisive victory on the battlefield," argues long-time Russian military analyst Aleksandr Golts, currently based at the Swedish Institute of International Affairs. The logistical challenge of training, arming, and moving that many forces is daunting. "I think Russia in its conditions now cannot support such a deployment," said the veteran military analyst in an email interview.

North Korean support of munitions has already been critical to the Russian war effort. Estimates of the supply of artillery shells and short-range ballistic missiles vary, but even at the lower end—around 1 million shells—it would constitute a quarter of all the ammunition used, says Golts. The North Korean supplies were considered crucial to Russia's ability in the last year to blunt a Ukrainian offensive and make clear gains on the battlefield.

US and South Korean officials have pointed to a huge volume of supplies in recent months. Robert Koepcke, US deputy assistant secretary of state for Japan, Korea, and Mongolia, told a conference in Washington last month that more than 16,500 containers of munitions have been sent from North Korea since September of last year and that Russia had launched more than 65 North Korean ballistic missiles into Ukraine.

Alliance or Marriage of Convenience?

Some analysts suggest that North Korean stockpiles may soon be exhausted and that there is a limit to the reach of this military axis. RAND analyst Bruce Bennett argued that this is a marriage of convenience rather than an alliance—one that may not outlive the supply of munitions. He points to evidence of China's unease with the relationship and Kim's efforts to reprise the Cold War games that his grandfather, Kim Il-sung, engaged in seeking to play off Moscow against Beijing.

Whatever may unfold, the Russians are signaling a commitment to this axis that has not been seen since the Korean War. During his June visit, Putin signed a Treaty on Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between the two countries, which included a

mutual defense clause under which each country agreed to help the other repel external aggression. On October 14, Putin submitted the treaty to the Russian State Duma for formal ratification. When asked if Russia would get involved in a conflict on the Korean Peninsula, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters that the two countries would engage in “strategic deep cooperation in all areas, including ensuring security.” As to the treaty’s implications, “the wording in the agreement does not need clarification, it is quite unambiguous,” he said.

Putin’s visit and the signing of the treaty sparked extensive discussion about what Russia might provide to North Korea, particularly the technological and military assistance it could potentially offer to bolster the North Korean nuclear and long-range ballistic missile programs. Observers have tracked mysterious Russian aircraft flights to and from North Korea and visits of senior officials dealing with the defense industry, looking for signs that Russian assistance may have helped the North Koreans solve problems in their missile testing.

Any Russian aid that effectively helps North Korea perfect its nuclear delivery systems would mark a sharp departure from past Russian policy, which not only opposed nuclear proliferation in principle but actively tried to prevent any leakage of technology. I was among the first Western correspondents to report on this during my time as the Moscow Bureau Chief for *The Christian Science Monitor*. In the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union, the North Koreans, with help from some Russians, attempted to lure a large group of Russian missile developers from the Makeyev Rocket Design Bureau to work there. The KGB eventually stopped the group at the airport as they were about to head to Pyongyang, although some design information may have been transferred.

Nuclear Implications

The war in Ukraine, among other things, seems to have led to a clear shift in Russian nuclear policy. Most prominently, there is increasing high-level discussion of lowering the threshold for the use of nuclear weapons on the battlefield. On September 25, Putin presided over a meeting of a previously unknown organization, the Security Council Standing Conference on Nuclear Deterrence, where he talked about the need to revise the country’s doctrine on the use of nuclear weapons in response to aggression even from non-nuclear states.

This shift mirrors the doctrinal declarations of the North Korean regime, envisioning the use of tactical and other nuclear weapons, even in a conflict with South Korea. But it also suggests that Russia would no longer see any barrier to aiding North Korea in that realm.

“Russia supported non-proliferation for many years,” Golts told this writer. “But now the situation has changed dramatically. Intimidation of the West has become the main goal.”

Golts points to statements that Putin made at the time of his visit to North Korea that warned Russia might supply “sensitive” military aid to US enemies in response to the Western supply of long-range weapons to Ukraine. Speaking to international reporters ahead of his North Korea trip, Putin said, “We are thinking that if someone thinks it is possible to supply such weapons to a war zone in order to strike at our territory and create problems for us, then why do we not have the right to supply our weapons of the same class to those regions of the world where there will be strikes on sensitive facilities of those countries that are doing this to Russia?”

After signing the treaty with Kim, Putin repeated that he “does not rule out” arming North Korea with such weapons. “From this point of view, Kim is the best possible recipient,” observes Golts. He points to the precedent of Russia leasing nuclear submarines to India, but it could also include aid to long-range missile development under the guise of assisting North Korea’s satellite launch capability. Already, the level of Russian military interaction goes beyond anything seen in decades. The recent visit of a Russian naval vessel to Chongjin, reportedly to ferry North Korean troops to Russia, was the first such entry since 1990.

Conclusion

There remain many unanswered questions about the nature of the deepening military axis between North Korea and Russia. What is evident, however, is both the escalatory nature of these developments and the growing danger they represent to not only the conduct of war against Ukraine but future security and stability on the Korean Peninsula.

Daniel Sneider is a Lecturer of International Policy and East Asian Studies at Stanford University and a Non-Resident Distinguished Fellow at the Korea Economic Institute of America. The views expressed here are the author’s alone.

Photo from [Wikimedia Commons](#).

KEI is registered under the FARA as an agent of the Korea Institute for International Economic Policy, a public corporation established by the government of the Republic of Korea. Additional information is available at the Department of Justice, Washington, D.C.

Return to the Peninsula

Tweet

Share

Share

Email