

The Russia-North Korea Strategic Partnership: Implications of North Korean Military Involvement in Ukraine

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Introduction

On June 18, 2024, Russia and North Korea signed a treaty on a comprehensive strategic partnership.¹ The recent enhancement of relations between those countries has drawn significant global attention. According to the speech delivered by NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte on October 28, 2024, North Korea has deployed troops in the Kursk region of Russia: *“Today, I can confirm that North Korean troops have been sent to Russia, and that North Korean military units have been deployed to the Kursk region.”*²



The border between Ukraine and Russia, with the Kursk region highlighted.³

North Korea's involvement in the war marks a significant escalation of the Russia-Ukraine war with broad implications. In this article, I examine the ways in which this strategic cooperation affects policymaking, regional stability, global security dynamics, and the international legal framework and consider their implications.

Background

¹Guinto, Joel, Kelly Ng, and Jake Kwon. 2024. "North Korea: Putin and Kim pledge mutual help against 'aggression.'" BBC. <https://www.bbc.com/news/article/ceddqkqzd5wo>.

²"Doorstep statement by NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte following the North Atlantic Council briefing on the DPRK's troop deployment to Russia." 2024. NATO. https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_230105.htm.

³Drummond, Michael. 2024. "Kursk incursion: How significant is Ukraine's advance into Russian territory?" Sky News. <https://news.sky.com/story/kursk-incursion-how-significant-is-ukraines-advance-into-russian-territory-13193173>.

The agreement between Russia and North Korea is based on defense commitments, expanded military cooperation, and joint ventures for technological and economic development.⁴ North Korea's military assistance to Russia, joint military exercises, and information-gathering activities are important components. North Korea is pursuing this alliance for several reasons: it is seeking a strong ally to offset its international isolation, purchasing advanced Russian military equipment, and receiving aid and investment from Russia to strengthen its economy. Conversely, Russia wants to strengthen its military power in Ukraine and harden relationships that may decrease Western influence and sanctions.

Policy Analysis

The deployment of North Korean forces into the Ukraine war might change the geopolitical arena dramatically. North Korean troops might improve the operational performance of Russian forces. This could increase the pressure on the Ukrainian defense, which could lead to the capturing of more territories by Russia. Additionally, Russia by using North Korean soldiers avoids mobilization, which is critical to sustaining the popularity of the Kremlin among Russian citizens. The deployment indicates Russia's readiness to escalate the war by involving important external players, which provokes a response from Ukraine's strategic partners. With the involvement of the North Korean soldiers Ukraine faces a bigger, more varied opponent, which might strain its military resources. Such actions only complicate the war, therefore making a settlement more difficult and increasing the possibility of a war on a larger scale.

Verified by various international intelligence agencies like NATO's, South Korean, and American, North Korean soldiers sent to Russia have provoked severe responses from other countries.⁵ A statement by the High Representative of the European Union on October 30, 2024, denounced the deployment of the North Korean military escalating Russia's conflict in Ukraine. Emphasizing the grave implications for European and world peace and security, the EU pointed out this action as a "clear violation of the UN Charter and of multiple UN Security Council resolutions."⁶ The EU has urged the DPRK to stop supporting Russia and said that further assistance will be reviewed with foreign partners and will lead to creating the solution of the appropriate reaction.

⁴ TONG, KIM, and ANIRUDDHA GHOSAL. 2024. "Russia and North Korea sign partnership deal that appears to be the strongest since the Cold War." AP News. <https://apnews.com/article/vladimir-putin-kim-jong-un-russia-north-korea-summit-ukraine-a6b8d2c12de7ee2ab6716d4747c9850e>.

⁵ Garamone, Jim. 2024. "Austin Confirms North Korea Has Sent Troops to Russia." Department of Defense. <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/3943880/austin-confirms-north-korea-has-sent-troops-to-russia/>.

⁶ "DPRK: Statement by the High Representative on the deployment of troops to Russia." 2024. EEAS. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/dprk-statement-high-representative-deployment-troops-russia_en.

According to Mark Rutte's speech, the deployment of North Korean forces threatens the security of Europe, the Indo-Pacific, and the Korean Peninsula. He stated that continued military cooperation between Russia and North Korea leads not only to prolonged war in Ukraine but also endangers peace on the Korean peninsula.⁷

The United States expressed serious concern about North Korea's troop deployment. Following Lloyd Austin's discussion with his South Korean counterparts on the 30th October 2024, the U.S. Defense Secretary said that North Korea's deployment would prolong the conflict and involve other nations⁸. Also, the US voiced concern about North Korean soldiers engaging in battle against Ukrainian forces equipped with Western weapons, leading in effect to an indirect military collision of the USA and North Korea.

Under international law, North Korean soldiers deployed to assist Russia in Ukraine pose serious moral and legal challenges. By ignoring the values stated in the UN Charter, the DPRK is violating Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity. Additionally, it violates UN Security Council resolutions that are imposing sanctions on North Korea, especially those limiting its military activity and foreign weapons transfers.

From a humanitarian standpoint, North Korean troops' participation raises further questions over possible abuses of human rights.⁹ Severe violations of human rights both within North Korea's own ranks and against its citizens hints possible violations towards the Ukrainian military and citizens by means of war crimes and crimes against humanity.¹⁰

Policy Solutions

International organizations like the United Nations should call emergency meetings to create possible collective solutions to handle the escalation. Implementing sanctions targeting important economic sectors to exert pressure on the withdrawal of North Korean troops. Furthermore, strengthening and

⁷ "Ukraine war: NATO says North Korean troops deployed to Russia's Kursk region." 2024. BBC.

<https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cyv737vy376o>.

⁸ Stewart, Phil, and Jonathan Landay. 2024. "US warns North Korea deployment could lengthen, broaden Ukraine war." Reuters.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/north-korea-may-seek-russian-icbm-nuclear-weapons-technology-south-korea-says-2024-10-30/>.

⁹ Roth, Kenneth. n.d. "World Report 2021: North Korea." Human Rights Watch. Accessed October 27, 2024.

<https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2021/country-chapters/north-korea>.

¹⁰ Hassan, Tirana. n.d. "World Report 2024: North Korea." Human Rights Watch. Accessed October 29, 2024.

<https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2024/country-chapters/north-korea>.

implementing already adopted UN resolutions forbidding military collaboration with North Korea would underline world legal norms.

Western countries should combine diplomatic pressure with strategic assistance. This might include diplomatic attempts to isolate Moscow and Pyongyang on the global scene as well as strengthen economic penalties on them. Rising support for Ukraine is vital, but it has to be controlled to prevent an escalation of the war. Without raising hostilities, offering defensive military aid, intelligence information sharing, and cybersecurity support would help Ukraine's situation to be adjusted. Another solution could be assigning Western military troops with a limited presence in safe areas of Ukraine. Therefore giving the ability to redeploy Ukrainian troops from safer regions to those where defense is needed more. Additionally, it would indicate the commitment without active participation in military actions. Given China's influence over North Korea, using it as a mediator is very crucial.

Diplomatic actions should inspire Beijing to use its ties to Pyongyang to defuse the crisis. Finally, re-engaging North Korea via diplomatic channels and providing economic incentives conditioned on adherence to international standards should be the main priorities of foreign initiatives.

Conclusion

Global security has been significantly impacted by North Korean forces being sent to assist Russia in Ukraine. This kind of behaviour fosters the crisis in Ukraine, ignores UN Security Council judgements and international law, and raises tensions in Europe and East Asia. The involvement of the North Korean military might spread the war and expand it. Also, the security of South Korea is threatened by the possibility of modern military technology being passed from Russia to North Korea.

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