

## Russia's Korean Gambit: The Strategic Significance of North Korean Troops' Deployment

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Source: Anadolu Ajansı

### Introduction

The recent deployment of North Korean troops to support Russia in its ongoing conflict in Ukraine marks a significant shift in geopolitical dynamics, particularly in the context of East Asia and the broader international order. This commentary examines the strategic implications of this development, focusing on the motivations behind North Korea's military engagement, the potential benefits for Russia, and the broader consequences for regional stability and global security.

### Historical Context

The recent deployment of North Korean troops to aid Russia in its war against Ukraine is not merely a military development, but a chilling echo of the Cold War. This unexpected alliance, born

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from shared resentment and a desperate need for mutual support, signals a dangerous shift in the global power balance.

Decades ago, the Soviet Union propped up North Korea, providing the ideological and material support that allowed it to survive. This Cold War-era partnership, forged in the fires of the Korean War, seemed to fade into history with the Soviet Union's collapse. However, the ghosts of that era now stalk Ukraine. Both Russia and North Korea find themselves increasingly isolated and under pressure from the West. Russia, facing unprecedented sanctions and international condemnation for its brutal invasion of Ukraine, desperately seeks allies and military reinforcements. North Korea, meanwhile, remains a pariah state, crippled by international sanctions and internal economic woes. This shared sense of isolation and a common enemy in the West has forged a new, albeit unlikely, axis of power. The deployment of North Korean troops to Ukraine is more than just a symbolic gesture. It signifies a deepening of military cooperation between the two regimes. This could lead to increased arms transfers, intelligence sharing, and potentially even joint military exercises. Such a deepening of ties poses a significant threat to regional and global security. The presence of North Korean troops on the battlefield in Ukraine raises the specter of the conflict escalating, potentially involving other actors and dragging the world closer to a new Cold War.

This unexpected alliance serves as a stark reminder that the world is a dynamic and unpredictable place. Traditional geopolitical alliances are crumbling, and new, often unexpected, partnerships are emerging. The Russia-North Korea alliance is a testament to the enduring power of shared interests and the enduring allure of authoritarianism. As the world grapples with the consequences of this dangerous alliance, it's crucial to remember that the past, while seemingly distant, often has a way of repeating itself.

## **Ratification of the Mutual Defense Treaty**

On November 12, 2024, North Korea ratified a landmark mutual defense treaty with Russia, which commits both nations to provide military assistance to each other in the event of aggression.<sup>23</sup> This treaty not only formalizes their growing military collaboration but also signifies a strategic

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<sup>2</sup> Deutsche Welle. "North Korea Ratifies Defense Treaty with Russia – DW – 11/12/2024." dw.com, November 12, 2024. <https://www.dw.com/en/north-korea-ratifies-defense-treaty-with-russia/a-70759474>.

<sup>3</sup> Deutsche Welle. "North Korea Ratifies Defense Treaty with Russia – DW – 11/12/2024." dw.com, November 12, 2024. <https://www.dw.com/en/north-korea-ratifies-defense-treaty-with-russia/a-70759474>.

alignment that could reshape power dynamics in Northeast Asia. The treaty's provisions indicate a commitment to immediate military support, reflecting a deepening partnership that extends beyond mere transactional exchanges.

## **Current Geopolitical Dynamics**

### **The Rise of Military Cooperation**

In recent years, the military cooperation between Russia and North Korea has intensified. High-profile visits by North Korean leaders to Russia, coupled with joint military exercises, signal a strengthening of ties. Reports indicate that North Korea has been receiving military supplies and training from Russia, a development that could enhance its military capabilities. This cooperation is perceived by many analysts as a direct response to heightened tensions with the United States and its allies, particularly following North Korea's nuclear tests and missile launches.

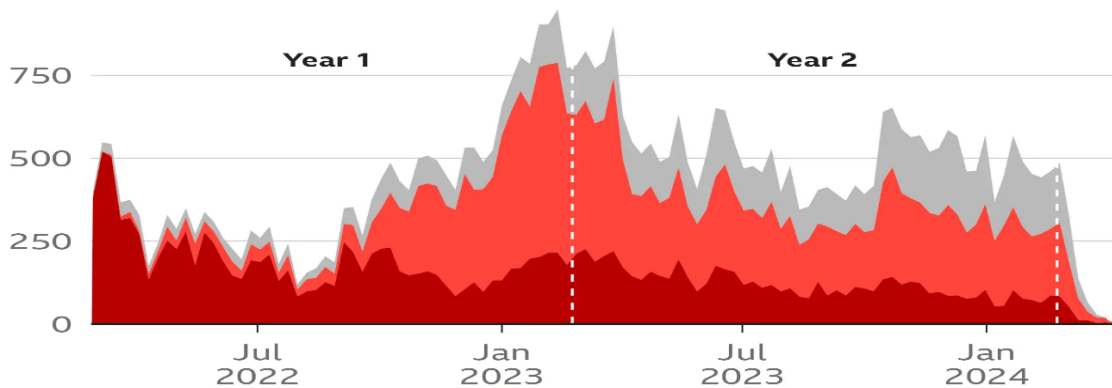
### **The Ukraine Conflict and its Implications**

The ongoing conflict in Ukraine has further complicated the geopolitical landscape. Russia's isolation from Western powers has led it to seek new alliances, and North Korea has emerged as a key partner in this regard. The potential for North Korean troops to be deployed in support of Russian military operations, or even in a peacekeeping capacity, raises important questions about regional stability and the balance of power in Northeast Asia.

## Over 50,000 Russians have died in Ukraine

Weekly counts of deaths confirmed by the BBC

■ Regular fighters ■ Civilian recruits ■ Unknown



Regular fighters include Wagner contractors. Civilian recruits include volunteers, draftees and inmates. Data to week ending 7 Apr 2024

Source: BBC analysis of data from BBC News Russian / Mediazona

BBC

Source: BBC<sup>4</sup>

## North Korea's Motivations for Troop Deployment

North Korea's decision to send approximately 10,000 troops to assist Russia in Ukraine can be understood through several lenses:

1. **Military Experience and Capability Building:** By engaging in combat operations alongside Russian forces, North Korean troops are expected to gain valuable battlefield experience that could enhance their operational effectiveness. This experience may be crucial for North Korea as it seeks to modernize its military capabilities and develop more advanced weapon systems.<sup>56</sup>
2. **Strengthening Bilateral Ties:** The troop deployment is part of a broader strategy to solidify military cooperation with Russia, which has been formalized through a defense

<sup>4</sup> Olga Ivshina, Becky Dale & Kirstie Brewer. "Russia's Meat Grinder Soldiers - 50,000 Confirmed Dead." BBC News, April 17, 2024. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-68819853>.

<sup>5</sup> North Korea's troop deployment to Russia: Intel report (2024) *SpecialEurasia*. Available at: <https://specialeurasia.com/2024/11/04/north-korea-troops-ukraine-risk/> (Accessed: 05 January 2025).

<sup>6</sup> North Korea joins Russia's war against Ukraine: Operational and strategic implications in Ukraine and Northeast Asia (no date) *Institute for the Study of War*. Available at: <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/north-korea-joins-russias-war-against-ukraine-operational-and-strategic-implications> (Accessed: 05 January 2025).

cooperation pact. This agreement obligates both nations to provide military assistance to each other in times of conflict, thereby reinforcing their strategic partnership.<sup>7</sup>

3. **Diversification of Alliances:** Historically dependent on China for support, North Korea's engagement with Russia allows it to diversify its foreign partnerships. This shift reduces Pyongyang's reliance on Beijing and empowers Kim Jong-un to adopt a more assertive posture in regional affairs.<sup>8</sup>
4. **Countering Western Influence:** The collaboration with Russia serves as a counterbalance to Western sanctions and military alliances in the region. By aligning with Moscow, North Korea positions itself as part of an anti-Western coalition that challenges U.S. influence globally.

## Strategic Implications of North Korean Troop Deployment

### Enhancing Military Capabilities

The deployment of North Korean troops can significantly enhance Russia's military capabilities in the region. North Korea possesses a large military force, and its troops are experienced in asymmetric warfare tactics, which could complement Russian military strategies. This collaboration could enable Russia to conduct more robust operations in the face of Western sanctions and military support for Ukraine.

### Deterrence Against U.S. Influence

From a strategic perspective, the deployment of North Korean troops serves as a countermeasure against perceived U.S. encroachment in Northeast Asia. By bolstering its military presence through North Korean allies, Russia aims to deter U.S. influence and reassure its own security interests. This alignment is particularly significant in light of U.S. military exercises in the region and the continued presence of American forces in South Korea and Japan.

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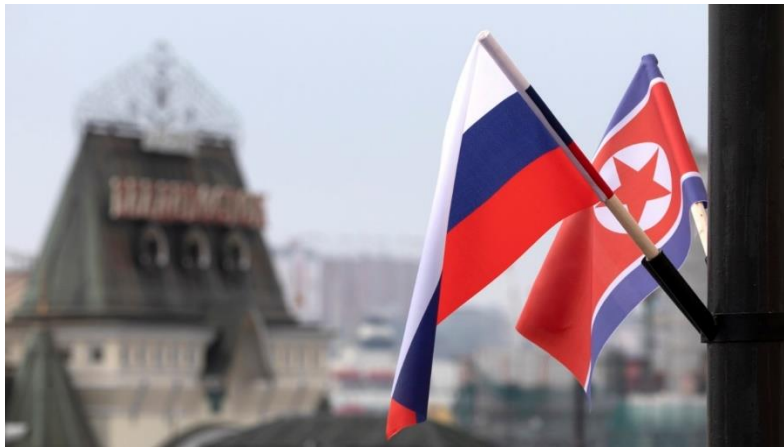
<sup>7</sup> "Russia Finalises Defence Cooperation Pact with North Korea." France 24, November 10, 2024.

<https://www.france24.com/en/europe/20241110-russia-finalises-defence-cooperation-pact-with-north-korea>.

<sup>8</sup> Manish Jung Pulami and Saume Saptaparna Nath. "Opinion – North Korea's Gambit in the Russia-Ukraine War." E-ir, November 5, 2024. <https://www.e-ir.info/2024/11/05/opinion-north-koreas-gambit-in-the-russia-ukraine-war/>.

## Regional Stability and Security Dilemmas

The introduction of North Korean troops into the regional security environment raises critical concerns regarding stability. The presence of additional military forces may exacerbate tensions between North Korea and South Korea, as well as between Russia and its neighbors. Increased military activities could lead to miscalculations or unintended escalations, drawing the region into a broader conflict. Moreover, the potential for North Korean troops to engage in aggressive actions could provoke a stronger military response from the U.S. and its allies, creating a security dilemma for all parties involved.



Source: VOA

## Strategic Benefits for Russia

The deployment of North Korean troops offers several strategic advantages for Russia:

1. **Augmentation of Military Forces:** The influx of North Korean personnel provides immediate operational support for Russian military efforts in Ukraine. This allows Moscow to redistribute its own forces to other critical fronts while maintaining pressure on Ukrainian defenses.
2. **Symbolic Solidarity Against the West:** The presence of North Korean troops serves as a powerful symbol of solidarity among nations opposing Western hegemony. It reinforces

Russia's narrative of building an international coalition against perceived threats from NATO and Western powers.<sup>9</sup>

3. **Access to Military Technology:** In exchange for troop deployment, North Korea stands to gain access to Russian military technology and expertise, which could accelerate its missile and nuclear programs. This transfer of technology enhances Pyongyang's deterrent capabilities against adversaries such as the United States and South Korea.
4. **Operational Flexibility:** Utilizing foreign troops like those from North Korea allows Russia to implement new tactical strategies on the battlefield, potentially integrating these forces into complex operational roles that could enhance overall effectiveness.

## Implications for Global Security

The deployment of North Korean troops has far-reaching implications for global security:

- **Increased Military Tensions:** The presence of North Korean soldiers in Ukraine exacerbates tensions not only in Eastern Europe but also in Northeast Asia. The potential for direct clashes between Ukrainian forces and North Korean units raises concerns about an escalation of hostilities that could draw in other nations.
- **Destabilization of Regional Alliances:** This partnership challenges existing security frameworks in Northeast Asia. The deepening ties between Pyongyang and Moscow may prompt responses from regional powers such as South Korea and Japan, potentially leading to an arms race or increased military preparedness among these nations.
- **Challenges to International Norms:** The collaboration between North Korea and Russia undermines existing international norms regarding military cooperation and arms control. Reports of arms transfers from North Korea to Russia further complicate efforts to enforce sanctions against Pyongyang and could embolden other rogue states to pursue similar partnerships.

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<sup>9</sup> "North Korea-Russia Military Ties Require Coordinated Response to Maintain Indo-Pacific Stability." Indo-Pacific Defense FORUM, November 24, 2024. <https://ipdefenseforum.com/2024/11/north-korea-russia-military-ties-require-coordinated-response-to-maintain-indo-pacific-stability/>.

- **Transformation into a Proxy Battlefield:** Ukraine is evolving into a proxy battlefield for broader geopolitical tensions, particularly those involving the Korean Peninsula. The presence of North Korean troops signifies a direct link between the Russo-Ukrainian war and security issues on the Korean Peninsula. This situation may lead to increased demands for military support from South Korea, as its security concerns grow in light of North Korea's enhanced military capabilities through combat experience gained in Ukraine. The potential for South Korea to provide arms or assistance to Ukraine could further escalate tensions in Northeast Asia, transforming the conflict into a multi-theater confrontation.
- **Challenges to International Norms and Humanitarian Concerns:** North Korea's involvement in Ukraine raises serious ethical and humanitarian issues. The deployment of troops violates international norms regarding military cooperation and intervention, particularly given North Korea's history of human rights abuses. The conditions faced by North Korean soldiers in Ukraine are likely dire, exacerbating humanitarian crises while benefiting their government through strengthened ties with Russia. This situation presents moral dilemmas for the international community regarding how to respond to such violations while addressing the humanitarian needs arising from the conflict.

## **Conclusion**

The deployment of North Korean troops to support Russian military efforts in Ukraine signifies a notable development in international relations with potential consequences for regional stability and the global security order. As cooperation between these nations intensifies through treaties and military exchanges, the likelihood of increased tensions in various regions may arise.

This evolving partnership necessitates a coordinated international response to mitigate the risks associated with heightened militarization in Northeast Asia and other parts of the world. Navigating this complex geopolitical landscape requires a comprehensive understanding of the strategic motivations driving these developments to inform the development of effective policies that promote stability while addressing the challenges posed by states acting outside of established norms.



The strategic significance of North Korean troop deployment underscores not only a shift in military alliances but also broader shifts in power dynamics that will likely influence future interactions on the global stage.