



## **Pyongyang on the Frontlines: The Risks and Rewards of Involvement in Russian War**

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Since the Russian full-scale invasion, North Korea has been aiding its ally, the Kremlin, not only diplomatically by recognizing the independence of the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics, brake-away Ukrainian regions, but also militarily by supplying ammunition and missiles to the sanctioned country. Over the course of the war, Pyongyang's involvement with Russia grew extensively and peaked with the deployment of North Koreans to the warzone at the end of October 2024. Such an unprecedented and bold move, along with Pyongyang's growing assertiveness on the Korean Peninsula, raised concerns in the international arena.

This paper explores the motivations, benefits, and risks associated with North Korea's involvement in the Ukraine war, analyzing its implications for the authoritarian allies in Pyongyang, Moscow, and Beijing. Examining these dynamics is crucial to understanding how this alliance may shape the future of international security and regional stability in both Europe and the Pacific.

### **Background**

By the second half of 2022, as Russian supplies of missiles started running out, President Vladimir Putin turned to his North Korean allies for help. However, 2024 saw significant advancements in the bilateral relationship between Moscow and Pyongyang, extending beyond trade and armaments sales. In March 2024, Russia, for the first time, [vetoed](#) the annual renewal of the UN panel of experts that overlooks North Korean violations of sanctions. Although largely symbolic, as the panel’s work does not directly influence the sanctions themselves, it has signaled that Moscow’s stance towards the Kim regime has drastically changed.

In June 2024 came another worrying turn of events: Putin and Kim [signed](#) the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Treaty between the Russian Federation and the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea. The agreement was dubbed “mutual defense treaty” in the media for its Article 4 in which both parties committed to provide each other with military assistance in case of an armed attack. The treaty involved a tightening of cooperation in a range of other spheres, including trade, economy, science, etc. This agreement was used as justification for the deployment of North Korean troops to the frontline to aid Russia in its campaign against Kyiv.



*The fake ID of a captured North Korean soldier. Source: Zelenskyi’s official telegram page*

The first [reports](#) of the involvement of North Korean soldiers on the battlefield came toward the end of October 2024. Since then, it has been confirmed that Pyongyang has sent [around](#) 10,000-12,000 of its soldiers to support its ally. According to the reports, North Koreans were deployed to fight in [Kursk](#) Oblast – a sovereign territory of Russia that was taken as part of Ukraine’s surprise offensive in August 2024. Reactions to the professionalism of North Korean troops on the battlefield have [varied](#): some Ukrainian fighters claim that North Koreans’ war tactics are outdated, while others evaluate them as a dangerous enemy and stress that they’re more disciplined and methodical than Russians themselves. Capturing North Korean soldiers alive has proven extremely difficult as they tend to [commit](#) suicide if there is a danger of capture. Over the past few months, the Ukrainian army has managed to bring only two wounded North Korean soldiers into captivity. According to the reports from Kyiv, Moscow, and Pyongyang tried their best to [conceal](#) the presence of North Koreans at the frontline – the North Korean soldiers were carrying fake IDs, claiming they were born in the Tuva region (Russia). Ukraine has [estimated](#) North Korean

casualties at approximately 3,000, including both killed and wounded. At the start of February 2025, there have also been [concerns](#) that Pyongyang is preparing to send new troops to the frontline despite the rather high casualties it suffered.

### **North Korea: benefits outweigh the risks**

Pyongyang has heavily benefited from its alliance with the Kremlin, and the deployment of troops to the frontline has, for now, been worth it for Kim. In exchange for several thousand human lives, North Korea has received an immense amount of weapons and technology that it previously couldn't get its hands on. This will allow the rogue state to exert pressure on its enemies in the Pacific, especially South Korea, a relationship with which has seen a drastic decline in recent months.

As the tensions in the Pacific rise (not without direct involvement from Pyongyang), North Korea is interested in strengthening its military to prepare for the potential conflict. Sending troops to Ukraine is seen as the perfect opportunity for soldiers to get hands-on experience in modern warfare and the usage of new technologies and weapons. Collaboration with Russia and the mutual defense agreement would potentially allow Kim to request Russian backup should the situation in the Pacific escalate toward military conflict. Moreover, with Moscow's help, North Korea will gain an opportunity to advance its nuclear program and become an even more influential state on the regional level.



*Russian President Vladimir Putin and North Korea's leader Kim Jong Un shake hands after a signing ceremony of the new partnership in Pyongyang, North Korea, on June 19, 2024. (Kristina Kormilitsyna/Sputnik/AP)*

Newly established close ties to Russia also take Pyongyang a step closer to getting out of international isolation – if the Kremlin can change its opinion on North Korea, then other states can, too. In case the deployment of troops changes the situation on the frontline to Moscow's benefit, Kim could also pressure Putin into letting him join Russia-backed international organizations, e.g., the Commonwealth of Independent States, thus extending Pyongyang's role on the international stage. Such a move could potentially breach the international isolation of Kim's regime and not only offer it a way to save its struggling economy but also show the ineffectiveness of UN-led institutions. This may also result in reducing other countries' fear of sanctions and consequences for their rogue actions – the destabilization and chaos that would be beneficial for both Pyongyang and Moscow.

It is also widely discussed that North Korea might be receiving generous financial compensation from Moscow for every soldier it sends to aid the Russian army. So, Kim not only gains military, political and economic benefits, he also gets to fill his pockets with money.

There are, of course, also some potential risks connected with the decision to send troops to the war. Should North Korean soldiers be unable to adapt to the reality of modern warfare and suffer heavy losses, this will cause reputational damage for Kim and his regime both outside and inside the country. Another big risk is the exposure of deployed troops to information about life outside of North Korea, which is completely different from the realities of their home country. The longer these people stay outside their country, the more they will learn about the outside world. Once they come back, the information wall that has been surrounding North Korea for decades might fall, destabilizing Kim's regime.



*In this photo provided by the North Korean government, North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, center, meets soldiers who took part in a training in North Korea, on March 13, 2024. (Korean Central News Agency/Korea News Service via AP, File)*

## **Russia: on the lookout for “cannon fodder”**

Despite some advancements, Russia hasn't been doing great on the frontline and has been running out of soldiers. Moscow adopted the war tactic that was meant to outnumber and overwhelm the opponent. Not extremely practical in the modern type of warfare, this strategy requires constant deployment of new troops and has cost Putin a lot of lives. In dire need of new soldiers, the Kremlin is trying its best to replenish the troops without having to resort to the new wave of mobilization. Russia's first and, for now, last during this war attempt at mobilization has destabilized the situation within the country and has caused reputational damage for Putin - something that is extremely sensitive for the Russian leader. The Russian government is now offering immense amounts of money to those who are willing to sign a contract with the Russian military. Moscow is also actively looking for volunteers from other friendly countries who are willing to exchange their lives for money. The deployment of North Korean troops to the frontline absolutely fits this pattern and is beneficial for Moscow as several thousand new soldiers are coming, not several hundred individuals or less.

However, it is important to note that approximately 10,000 soldiers won't exactly solve the problem for Russia, which has not given up on its goal of taking Kyiv and has already sacrificed way too many lives in this war. North Korean soldiers are also not trained as Russian ones, and they don't speak any language except Korean, so getting them to fight effectively will pose a challenge to the Russian military. Except that, as mentioned previously, if Putin is paying Kim for each individual soldier, then the Kremlin has added a new expense to its already extensive war spending while the economic situation within the country is dramatically declining. For now, the Kremlin is also limited by the territory where North Korean troops can operate. Sending other country's soldiers to Russian sovereign territory under a mutual defense treaty is one thing, but deployment of North Koreans to the sovereign territory of Ukraine will mean that Pyongyang will officially become a side in the war. This could be an extremely dangerous escalation that Moscow has currently refrained from but is in dire need of.

### **China: Beyond the ambiguity**

Although China - the most prominent ally of North Korea - has not been directly involved in the arrangement between Moscow and Pyongyang, it is of keen importance to understand where Beijing's interests lie as North Korea gets more heavily involved with the Kremlin. Since the start of the Russian invasion in 2022, Chinese official statements regarding the war have been extremely ambiguous. Beijing emphasized its desire for a peaceful solution and stressed the importance of respecting territorial integrity, but at the same time, it helped Putin avoid Western sanctions and didn't condemn Russian actions against Ukraine. China has also tried to distance itself from the new level of escalation that came with the defense agreement and deployment of North Korean troops by underlining that it is a [matter](#) between Moscow and Pyongyang. But the key question is: does Beijing favor this "matter"?

If the Kremlin reaches success in its campaign against Ukraine, China might reap some benefits that will bring it closer to achieving its goals in the international arena. With the issue of Taiwan unsolved, Beijing hopes that Russian victory will show the "rogue island" that Taipei doesn't stand a chance at winning the war. So, the only rational way would be to pursue peaceful unification - a scenario that China has been attempting to achieve for the last several decades.

Another reason why Beijing could be interested in the deployment of North Korean troops to the frontline is seeing the Western response: actions of already heavily sanctioned North Korea are challenging the norms of international law once again. The US and its allies have [issued a joint statement](#) condemning the military alliance of Russia and North Korea. Washington has also introduced additional sanctions against both Pyongyang and Moscow aiming at obstructing Kim's capability to help his friend in the Kremlin. Yet, as [reports state](#) that Pyongyang is getting ready to send new troops to the frontline despite heavy losses, it seems that the Western actions weren't enough to disrupt the alliance. If the West doesn't prove that it can contain Pyongyang and pressure it to abide by norms, it will signal that the US-led system is in dire need of amendment. This would perfectly play into the hand of Beijing which is interested in reforming the global world order.

The war in Ukraine is also keeping the focus of the West away from the Pacific and forcing it to supply armaments to Kyiv: the longer the war goes on, the more resources will the US and its allies burn in Ukraine. Should Beijing decide to take Taiwan by force, it needs the West to be as weak as possible, so from this point of view escalation may be seen as beneficial.

However, despite the clear advantages of sending North Korean troops to war against Ukraine, there are also quite a few downsides for China. Beijing has highlighted its desire for peace for a reason - its economy

heavily relies on international trade and thus stability on the global level. The Chinese economy is currently not at its finest, so Beijing is eager to avoid Western sanctions at all costs. Having one of its closest allies involved in Ukraine on the Russian side doesn't exactly help the case. Although Beijing prefers not to get in between the Moscow-Pyongyang alliance, the rapprochement of these two states should be worrying, at least for one reason: nuclear weapons. It has been handy for China to have under its full control a "mad ally with nukes," but closer ties with Russia challenge Pyongyang's dependence on Beijing and offer it an opportunity to pursue a nuclear program without supervision from China. With the Kremlin's constant threats to nuke Ukraine or the West and North Korea's interest in destabilizing the situation in the international arena, specifically in the Pacific, this alliance might turn "explosive." This is extremely troubling for the whole world, including Beijing, which has made it very clear that it stands against any attempts at usage of nuclear weapons.

## Conclusion

The cooperation between Russia and North Korea has grown extensively over the last few years, as Kim has provided military assistance to his Russian counterpart. Vladimir Putin has gone from supporting the sanctions regime against Pyongyang to signing the mutual defense treaty with North Koreans. The decision of Kim to send North Korean soldiers to the frontline to support Russian forces on the field took the alliance between the two states to a new and unprecedented level.

The North Korean regime has for now been reaping extensive benefits from its audacious decision. It has gained access not only to new military technologies that its Russian allies provide but also an opportunity to train its soldiers in the conditions of real modern warfare. This valuable experience might come in handy should the tensions in the Pacific escalate. Alliance with Putin is also giving Pyongyang a chance to step out of international isolation and widen its influence in the Pacific.

The Kremlin is looking for new ways to replenish the number of its troops on the battlefield without resorting to the mobilization of Russians that comes with high reputational costs. Despite this rather short-term benefit, the deployment of North Korean troops extends Moscow's already unreasonably high war expenditures as Kim's regime is demanding financial and technological aid in exchange for its help.

China has done its best to distance itself from the alliance between Putin and Kim; its official reaction has been nothing but ambiguous. Despite that, this new friendship is both advantageous and concerning for Beijing. Should Moscow succeed in pressuring Kyiv into submission, this could help China's case by convincing Taiwan to accept a peaceful unification. It would also expose the inability of the West to maintain order in the international arena. At the same time, Pyongyang might decide to pursue its nuclear program under the supervision of Moscow and heighten the risk of irresponsible usage of nuclear weapons.

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