A New Cold War Flashpoint in the Indo-Pacific

Hyun-Seung Lee

North Korean troops are fighting in Europe. Russian missiles are fueling Pyongyang's nuclear ambitions. Sanctioned authoritarian states are reshaping global power structures. These are not hypothetical scenarios—they are unfolding in real time.





North Korean leader Kim Jong Un and Russia's President Vladimir Putin shake hands after signing a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in Pyongyang, North Korea in June this year. I KCNA/AP

As Russia's war in Ukraine persists, a strategic alliance has emerged, one that evokes Cold War-era dynamics, yet introduces unprecedented risks in today's geopolitical landscape.[1] At the center of this realignment is the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Treaty, signed between North Korea and Russia in June 2024.[2] This agreement is not merely a diplomatic formality, but a deliberate effort to challenge Western influence, reshape global power structures, and destabilize Indo-Pacific security.

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Moscow, facing prolonged conflict and dwindling military resources, has turned to one of the world's most heavily armed – yet diplomatically isolated – regimes for assistance in its war aims. The consequences are already unfolding: North Korean troops are reinforcing Russian positions in Ukraine, and weapons shipments are sustaining the Kremlin's war effort. The emergence of this authoritarian bloc stretching from Eastern Europe to the Pacific is not just a wartime maneuver for Russia, but a broader geopolitical shift with long-term implications for global stability.

WHY RUSSIA NEEDS NORTH KOREA

Moscow's reliance on Pyongyang is not an act of convenience – it is an act of survival.[3] Since launching its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Russia has been facing a dwindling weapons stockpile and chronic manpower shortages while going up against Ukraine's formidable defense.[4] Despite ramping up domestic arms production, Russia's war effort remains strained.

North Korea now offers three distinct advantages that Moscow cannot afford to ignore:

First, a vast stockpile of Soviet-era munitions provides an immediate solution to Russia's ammunition crisis. Pyongyang is still operating weapons systems designed in the Soviet era. It possesses millions of artillery shells, rockets, and ballistic missiles that can seamlessly integrate into Russian arsenals. By October 2024, South Korean intelligence estimated that North Korea had shipped approximately 20,000 containers to Russia, with the potential to transport around 9.4 million 152 mm shells.[5]

Second, manpower, a resource Moscow increasingly lacks, is another crucial resource which Pyongyang has to offer. As Russian casualties surpass 300,000, Moscow has resorted to mobilizing domestic convicts, aging reservists, and poorly trained conscripts to sustain its fight.[6, 7] In contrast, North Korea offers an ideologically indoctrinated force trained under extreme conditions. These conditions stem from widespread shortages in military supplies, such as food scarcity, inadequate uniforms and equipment, and the lack of gear suited for actual combat (Gyu, 2025).[8] Despite critical shortcomings in medical and survival training, military training also continues to emphasize glorification of sacrifice for the leader and the regime – sometimes even encouraging suicide with grenades over the possibility of capture



An MH-60R Seahawk of Helicopter Maritime Strike Squadron (HSM) 35 refuels aboard littoral combat ship USS Fort Worth (LCS-3) in the South China Sea; Philippine Navy ships BRP Gregorio del Pilar (PF 15) and BRP Ramon Alcaraz (PF 16) in the background. | Anonymous United States Navy photographer | public domain

(Geddie, 2025).[9] Reports indicate that at least 11,000 North Korean troops have already been deployed to Russia, actively engaging in combat operations across occupied Ukrainian territories to help alleviate Russia's manpower crisis.[10]

Unbound by global regulatory frameworks, Pyongyang ensures a steady flow of arms and logistical support as well, allowing Moscow to prolong its war effort despite Western sanctions. Geographically linked to Russia and already heavily sanctioned by the West itself, Pyongyang operates with little fear of further economic or diplomatic penalties. Unlike China, which remains cautious about openly violating Western sanctions, North Korea has little concern for such costs, making it an ideal partner for Russia to evade Western sanctions.[11]

Yet, the significance of this alliance extends well beyond Ukraine. For Moscow, Pyongyang is more than just a wartime supplier – it is a strategic counterweight to U.S. military presence in the Indo-Pacific. If Russia transfers advanced missile guidance systems, cyber warfare equipment, and air defense systems to North Korea, it could significantly enhance Pyongyang's ability to threaten South Korea, Japan, and U.S. forces in the region. This is not merely a wartime alliance, but a strategic partnership designed to undermine U.S. power across multiple theaters of conflict.

NORTH KOREAN TROOPS IN UKRAINE: MORE THAN MERCENARIES

Many security analysts have fixated on the battlefield performance of North Korean troops in the Russia-Ukraine war, assessing their combat effectiveness as mercenaries.[12] However, such assessments fail to recognize the deeper motives behind Pyongyang's involvement.

North Korean troops are not only hired guns; they are ideological warriors, deeply loyal to the Kim regime. Unlike Wagner fighters, who operate with a degree of autonomy, North Korean soldiers function under a rigid command structure, trained for high-intensity warfare and political obedience. Their deployment in Ukraine is not just about supporting Russia – it is also about strengthening North Korea's own military and strategic position.

The combat experience they gain fighting in Ukraine is invaluable. For decades, the Korean People's Army (KPA) has remained largely untested in modern warfare, but in Ukraine, its soldiers are learning key battlefield tactics, urban combat tactics, and drone warfare techniques. These lessons could be directly applied to future conflicts on the Korean Peninsula, making the KPA a far more formidable force.[13]



North Korean leader Kim Jong Un visiting soldiers from the Korean People's Army, at an undisclosed location on Oct. 17. 2024.



North Korean deploys troops to Russia amid Ukraine war escalation | Archyde | Getty Images

Beyond combat experience, the war serves as a testing ground for North Korea's weapons systems. Pyongyang has long been constrained to missile tests in the Sea of Japan, but the battlefield conditions in Ukraine allow for the observation and refinement of its artillery, drones, and missile capabilities under live combat conditions. This data is critical for improving the accuracy and lethality of the KPA's weapons, particularly in the event of a future conflict with South Korea or the United States.[14]

TECHNOLOGY, HARD CURRENCY, AND POWER: WHAT NORTH KOREA GAINS

While Russia receives munitions and manpower, North Korea is reaping high-value benefits that could reshape its military capabilities and economic survival.

The most concerning aspect of this relationship is weapons technology transfer between the two powers. Russian advancements in hypersonic missile guidance, submarine-launched ballistic missiles, and satellite reconnaissance could dramatically enhance North Korea's long-range strike capabilities.[15, 16] Cyber and electronic warfare techniques shared by Moscow could give Pyongyang the ability to disrupt South Korean and U.S. defense networks – a critical asset in any future conflict.

Beyond military technology exchange, North Korea is gaining substantial economic benefits from its partnership with Russia. Years of international sanctions and growing economic isolation – particularly after the United Nations Security Council's 2017 resolution banning North Korean natural resource exports – have drastically reduced Pyongyang's foreign currency earnings.[17] Between 2016 and 2020, North Korea's total foreign trade volume plummeted by over 86 percent, from $6.5 billion to just $800 million, cutting off critical revenue streams for the regime.[18]

Russia's renewed cooperation is reversing this economic isolation. North Korean troops deployed in Ukraine are reportedly paid $2,000 per month, generating millions in revenue for Pyongyang.[19] Additionally, tens of thousands of North Korean laborers are working in Russian farming, logging, and construction projects that bring in crucial foreign currency, sustaining an economy that has been crippled by sanctions.[20]

Energy and food security have also become major gains for North Korea. Russia has resumed large-scale shipments of oil and wheat, alleviating North Korea's chronic commodity shortages.[21, 22]



North Korea people are welcoming Kim Jong-un and Vladimir Putin at Kim Il-sung square. | Office of the President of the Russian Federation | CC BY 4.0

These supplies also reduce Pyongyang's dependence on China – a long-term desire of Premier Kim Jong Un – and mitigate the economic shocks of prolonged sanctions.[23]

Diplomatic protection is another crucial benefit for the Kim regime. By blocking UN sanctions, Russia shields Pyongyang from consequences and sanctions for nuclear program development and constant human rights abuses.[24] This diplomatic cover allows North Korea to resist further sanctions and ensures the regime avoids global accountability.

The long-term impact is clear: a more economically resilient, militarily sophisticated North Korea, emboldened by Russia, is free to pursue its ambitions with greater confidence. This war is not just a military opportunity for Pyongyang – it is an economic and strategic lifeline that could sustain its survival for years to come.

A NEW THREAT TO INDO-PACIFIC SECURITY

The North Korea-Russia military axis carries profound consequences for the Indo-Pacific. With Russian support, Pyongyang is no longer a peripheral threat – it has become a destabilizing force with regional ambitions.

South Korea and Japan now face a determined North Korea, armed with advanced weaponry and battle-hardened troops. Increased missile tests, cyberattacks, and military provocations are all but certain in the region.

The United States is now confronted with a two-front challenge, forced to manage simultaneous threats in both Eastern Europe and East Asia. Washington's military and diplomatic resources are already stretched thin, and this new alliance only compounds this strain.[25] The broader global order also faces erosion as Russia's defiance of sanctions may embolden other authoritarian regimes to break international norms, accelerating weapons proliferation and destabilizing fragile regions.

THE NECESSARY RESPONSE: COUNTERING THE THREAT

To contain the growing Russia-North Korea military axis, the US and its allies must take decisive action through enhanced deterrence, stricter sanctions enforcement, and stronger regional cooperation.

Expanding military deterrence is essential. Deploying additional THAAD missile defense systems in South Korea and reinforcing U.S. military bases in the Pacific would help counter the growing

"Enhancing U.S.-Japan-South Korea trilateral defense initiatives and increasing joint military drills would reinforce collective security and readiness."

threat of North Korean missiles.[26] At the same time, more aggressive sanctions enforcement – particularly by cracking down on Russia-North Korea arms transfers through naval interdictions – would disrupt Pyongyang's supply chains and limit its access to advanced military capabilities.

Strengthening regional military cooperation is equally critical. Enhancing U.S.-Japan-South Korea trilateral defense initiatives and increasing joint military drills would reinforce collective security and readiness. The United States must also prepare for potential North Korean provocations by bolstering missile defenses in Guam and across the Pacific, ensuring it can swiftly respond to any escalation.

WILL CHINA JOIN THE AXIS? BEIJING'S STRATEGIC CALCULUS

China officially maintains a cautious distance from the North Korea-Russia partnership, but it stands to benefit from this new alliance.[27] A militarily-capable North Korea serves as a buffer against U.S. influence in East Asia, keeping American forces on the Korean Peninsula preoccupied. By allowing Russia and North Korea to challenge the West and its allies, Beijing achieves its desires of reduced Western engagement in its area without direct confrontation.

A stronger, more defiant North Korea ensures U.S. military assets remain tied down in the region, diverting attention away from Taiwan. If tensions between Washington and Beijing escalate, North Korea could also serve as a proxy threat against Japan, South Korea, or U.S. Pacific forces, further complicating America's regional posture.

However, China also has a clear dilemma: an over-powerful North Korea could become unpredictable and uncontrollable. Beijing will likely maintain its delicate balancing act by providing economic and political cover for Pyongyang while ensuring it does not gain too much political autonomy.

A NEW COLD WAR WITH UNEXPECTED PLAYERS

Who would have imagined that North Korean troops would be fighting in Europe while Russian missile technology empowers Pyongyang's nuclear program? The world is witnessing the emergence of a new Cold War, but this time, with unexpected alliances and shifting battlefronts. If the United States and its allies fail to counter this growing axis, the next major conflict may not be in Eastern Europe – but in the Indo-Pacific. The world can no longer afford to treat North Korea as a secondary threat. It is now a key player in a dangerous new geopolitical order, and the time to act is now.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Hyun Seung Lee, a North Korean escapee turned influential consultant, draws on his deep experience in DPRK military affairs and international trade to advise the U.S. government and policy community. Once a sergeant in the DPRK Army Special Force and a key figure in North Korea's shipping and mining trade with China, he now serves as Lead Strategist at the Global Peace Foundation and founded the Pyongyang Examiner. Fleeing in 2014 amid brutal purges, he holds degrees from Dongbei University of Finance and Economics and Columbia University, and his insights frequently enrich platforms like Voice of America and Radio Free Asia.



Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu, third left, meets with North Korean Defense Minister Kang Sun-nam, third right, in Pyongyang on July 26, 2023. | Russian Defense Ministry | Handout/Anadolu Agency via Getty Images.

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