

North Korea in the Ukraine war presages an era of confrontation with China

Thompson, Drew

2024

Thompson, D. (2024). North Korea in the Ukraine war presages an era of confrontation with China. *RSIS Commentaries*, 175-24.

<https://hdl.handle.net/10356/181436>

Nanyang Technological University

Downloaded on 09 Feb 2025 00:18:40 SGT

RSIS Commentary is a platform to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy-relevant commentary and analysis of topical and contemporary issues. The authors' views are their own and do not represent the official position of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced with prior permission from RSIS and due credit to the author(s) and RSIS. Please email to Editor RSIS Commentary at RSISPublications@ntu.edu.sg.

North Korea in the Ukraine War Presages an Era of Confrontation With China

By Drew Thompson

SYNOPSIS

North Korea's deployment of troops to support Russia's invasion of Ukraine expands the conflict, intertwining security challenges in Asia and Europe. This development has significant implications for NATO, South Korea, and China, particularly if China's support for Russia expands and Ukraine's defences degrade, effectively ensuring China's adversarial relationship with the West.

COMMENTARY

The Ukraine conflict is expanding and escalating with the introduction of North Korean troops to the battlefield. North Korea's provision of troops is a new development in an increasingly cooperative network of support for Russia's war effort involving China, Iran, and North Korea, which has been described as an "[Axis of Upheaval](#)".y

This development has intertwined two major security challenges in Asia and Europe, presenting significant implications for security and stability in both regions and China's relationship with Europe and the United States.

DPRK Deploys Troops to Russia

Russian President Vladimir Putin and North Korea's supreme leader Kim Jong-un signed a strategic partnership agreement in June, foreshadowing a strengthening of the Russia-DPRK relationship amid the Ukraine conflict. North Korea has provided [munitions](#), including artillery and rockets, which Russia has used against Ukraine.

In October, Ukrainian, South Korean, and US officials began warning that [10,000 soldiers North Korea deployed to Russia](#) were receiving equipment, Russian uniforms and false identification to mask their origin. US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin

subsequently declared that North Koreans in the war zone are [legitimate military targets](#), and there have been reports of [North Korean soldiers killed](#).

It is obvious that Russia benefits from the infusion of fresh troops that [offset heavy personnel losses](#), averaging 1,500 casualties per day. This enables Putin to avoid another unpopular mobilisation of reservists. North Korea's benefits are possibly far broader, but without transparency in the bilateral agreement, it is impossible to be certain of the contours of the arrangement.

It is possible that the DPRK can get access to Russian technology, which could improve its civilian industry and military enterprises, including key dual-use technologies. Russia has reportedly also offered to pay the DPRK [US\\$2,000](#) per month per soldier, which will bolster Pyongyang's coffers.

Furthermore, Pyongyang can expect mutual support should North Korea find itself in a conflict with South Korea. North Korea likely will gain military and diplomatic advantages from its agreement to fight alongside Russia. Militarily, the Korean People's Army (KPA) will gain crucial experience in modern warfare, including exposure to new tactics to inform their doctrine development.

While Russia has failed to demonstrate effectiveness in some domains, such as traditional combined arms, the KPA could learn from Russian advancements (and shortcomings) in unmanned systems and drone warfare, electronic warfare, signature management, and the fundamentals of real-world military operations, such as logistics.

Diplomatically, Pyongyang can hedge against pressure from Beijing, balancing its two allies to gain maximum benefits or even playing them off against one another. North Korea's entry into the Russia-Ukraine war, however, brings a new degree of geopolitical complexity that affects Europe, South Korea, and China.

Geopolitical Implications for NATO, South Korea, and China

Europe and NATO have been quiet about North Korea's entry into the war. Rather than visibly increasing support for Ukraine, European and NATO leaders have settled for statements of the obvious confirming DPRK troops in the theatre, describing the development as a ["dangerous escalation"](#) and a ["turning point"](#). A US Department of Defense spokesperson warned that if DPRK troops ["enter combat, they are legitimate targets for Ukrainian soldiers"](#).

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky has expressed outrage at NATO's lack of tangible response, including its unwillingness to impose costs on Russia to re-establish deterrence. A frustrated Zelensky vented to South Korean media, warning, "And if there is nothing – and [I think that the reaction to this is nothing, it has been zero](#) – then the number of North Korean troops on our border will be increased".

NATO has not even publicly linked North Korea's troop deployment to previously announced plans to open a liaison office in Japan, nor has it called for expediting the office. As President Trump prepares to enter office, his long-standing concerns about NATO members not taking their defence seriously appear increasingly valid, and the

lack of a NATO response gives him one more justification to pressure its members to spend more on defence.

The material and intangible benefits North Korea will gain from the deployment to Ukraine have implications for South Korea's interests and security. A more diplomatically, economically, and militarily secure North Korea that is more closely aligned with Russia and still able to sustain its relationship with China reduces South Korea's security.

North Korea will be able to continue the development of its nuclear and ballistic missile programmes in contravention of UN Security Council resolutions. South Korea's ability to engage Pyongyang and Seoul's ultimate goal of a unified peninsula is even more distant.

South Korea's response options are limited and unsatisfying, considering its strategic objectives. Increasing military support to Ukraine is an obvious choice, particularly if it bolsters South Korea's defence industry. Providing munitions and weapons to Ukraine presents an opportunity for Seoul to draw down ageing stockpiles and re-fresh them with newly manufactured items.

Sharing intelligence with Ukraine and NATO provides an opportunity for South Korea to understand North Korean capabilities in actual combat better and help Ukraine mitigate its challenges from facing North Korean troops on the battlefield, such as managing prisoners of war. South Korea might also consider deepening its relationship with NATO and offering to host a liaison office in South Korea as a show of support for collective security.

China has been lukewarm about Russia's war since the invasion in February 2022 and has been relatively quiet since the revelation that North Korea was sending troops to Russia. One Chinese scholar described China's position on the troop deployment as "[cautious but supportive](#)".

Russia's deputy foreign minister visited Beijing at the end of October, meeting Foreign Minister Wang Yi, affirming that China-Russia ties have reached historic highs and are "[unaffected by shifting global dynamics](#)", noting tersely that "The two sides also exchanged views on the Ukraine crisis".

The visit demonstrated that Moscow is attentive to Beijing's interests, which are complex and broad, ranging from the desire to see Russia succeed in its war and maintain mutually beneficial relations with China to the competing objective of ensuring that its support for Russia does not result in China's isolation from the global economy and financial system. North Korea's troop deployment may make Beijing's approach to achieving that balance more complicated. Still, it is unlikely to preclude it from achieving those objectives, particularly considering the weak response from NATO and the US thus far.

Conclusion

North Korea's troop deployment to the Russia-Ukraine front represents an escalation and expansion of the conflict to include Northeast Asia, raising risks and fears that

have thus far not been realised. The restraint demonstrated by NATO, the US, and South Korea has prevented the worsening of the conflict and its expansion beyond the already involved parties, but the situation remains dynamic and uncertain.

Should the military situation in Ukraine destabilise, China's support for Russia, the participation of North Korean forces in that destabilisation and Beijing's acquiescence in North Korea's involvement will make China complicit and an adjacent belligerent in the eyes of Europe and the United States. Should that transpire, China's relationship with the developed economies of the West could be irreparably harmed, marking a true turning point where competition with China evolves into a state of confrontation.

The incoming Trump Administration will undoubtedly see China as an adversary at the strategic level, with Beijing's support for Russia's invasion further reinforcing that conviction. Trump's pledge to quickly resolve the war is an admirable sentiment, but many sages have observed that wars are easy to start but difficult to end.

Should Trump successfully use his political capital with Putin and leverage over Zelensky to establish a satisfactory peace, the risks of China irreparably damaging its relationship with Europe and the US decrease considerably

Drew Thompson is a Senior Fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore.

S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU Singapore
Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798