



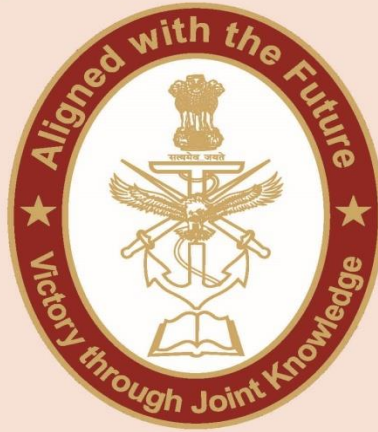
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NORTH KOREAN SOLDIERS ON THE BATTLEFIELD AND CONSEQUENCES FOR RUSSIA- NORTH KOREA ALLIANCE

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Introduction

In the backdrop of the Russia-Ukraine war, the Ukrainian and South Korean intelligence agencies have been continuously monitoring significant developments on the battlefield since North Korean troops were stationed in the Kursk region in late 2024. The reports indicate chaos in planning and coordination among the Russian and North Korean soldiers, resulting in significant casualties and blunders that bear repercussions on the newly formed partnership. Initially, the Russian paramilitary soldiers of the Ahmat battalion, commonly known as 'Kadyrovites', suffered casualties at the hands of North Korean troops deployed in the Kursk region.¹ This friendly fire incident which took place in November 2024 might be of small magnitude but such incidents impact the newly formed Russia-North Korea partnership in the long term, if not addressed immediately. Beginning this year, high number of casualties among North Korean forces are estimated to be in the range of approximately 300, with around 2,700 injured, while some being detained by the Ukrainian army as war prisoners.² This raises significant questions such as if the alliance signed between both the nations in 2024 is turning out to be beneficial or a liability for Russia, as the war is progressing.

The unfolding situation in Russia's war against Ukraine assumes significance due to the unknown repercussions for the players involved as the communication and coordination among the Russian and North Korean soldiers have already become a pressing issue to deal with. This makes it difficult to plan and coordinate strategies among themselves and execute against Ukrainian soldiers on the battlefield. The language barrier stands out as the main problem, as reports suggest that only one interpreter is assigned to thirty Korean men.³ Ukrainian Intelligence also suggests that another factor that does not sit well is the lack of bonhomie between the Russian and North Korean soldiers. As intercepted by the Ukrainian Intelligence on the radio set, the North Korean soldiers are codenamed as 'K' soldiers by the Russian soldiers.⁴

Additionally, the North Korean troops lack the practical experience to fight in an active war, as the North Korean soldiers hold experience mostly in preparing for war but have not fought an actual war since the Korean War of the 1950s. The new generation of North Korean soldiers thus lack on-field experience. There are other sets of structural factors apart from the language barrier. For example, the Ukrainian and Russian soldiers share the same facial features, which causes confusion for the North Korean troops to recognise their adversary on the battlefield. With all these factors combined, Russia needs a well-thought-out approach to sustain their newly strengthened partnership.

The Russia-North Korea Treaty

The Treaty of Comprehensive Strategic Partnership signed in June 2024 says that if either country is invaded, the other partner nation must provide military and other assistance.⁵ The signing of the partnership on the part of Russian President Putin needs to be deeply appreciated in the backdrop of dwindling military resources with a shortage of equipment, ammunition and manpower challenges in its fight against Ukraine. While North Korean economy is already strained due to heavy Western sanctions with years of isolation, it sees this partnership as an opportunity to boost its economic and military advancements. Therefore, the strategic bilateral relationship between both the nations appears to be the result of long-term strategic planning formed in the backdrop of the somewhat strategic aloofness faced by Russia during the ongoing war. Thus, as of now, Russia requiring external support in its war of attrition

appears to be the need of the hour. The relationship, on the face of it, might appear transactional, but it holds significance with the ongoing global transition.

Russia's Interests

After the disintegration of the Soviet Union, this is the first active involvement of Russia with North Korea. Russia, at present, needs strategic partners who can support its war with Ukraine. Russia does not draw its military strength from North Korea for major defence requirements. Rather, it needs strategic allies to build international standing to defend itself in the long run. Military analyst Marina Marion at the King's College London argues that Moscow does not depend significantly on North Korea and is not the main source of power in their fight against Ukrainians. Russia also faces severe strains with its declining geopolitical influence, particularly in the Middle East, with the pro-Russian Assad regime falling in Syria in a hasty turn of events.⁶

North Korea's Gains from the Treaty

With its already severely sanctioned economy, receiving more oil, money, food, raw materials, and energy supplies from Moscow, Pyongyang has become a significant beneficiary of the Russia-Ukraine war. Some reports suggest that North Korea has also received missile technology from Russia for its ballistic missiles to reach across the Pacific, creating a strong deterrent for the US.⁷

North Korean soldiers are also getting better equipped to fight on the contemporary battlefield, particularly against the Western air defences. This may help the North Korean military to train as per the modern warfare techniques to fight in future wars. North Korea's support to Russia and signing of the treaty reflects the building of a robust alliance with a major global power. However, the risks of disengagement are minuscule, as North Korea is already under heavy Western sanctions and receiving condemnation for its involvement in the war at global level. North Korea's engagement in developing closer ties with Russia can be perceived major strategic move, in the backdrop of North Korean leader Kim Jong-Un denouncing all the engagements and reunification hopes with its estranged neighbour, South Korea. In addition, North Korea also declared South Korea as a primary foe and its principal enemy'.⁸

North Korea, already under isolation from the international community, has a chance to renew its relevance as well as giving positive spin to its depriving economy through this partnership. This has made North Korea desperate and thus is looking at long-term goals. From its viewpoint, the relationship is stable as it sees this war benefitting it economically and strategically. North Korea's support to its communist allies in wars is not new, as it also sent fighter pilots to North Vietnam during the Vietnam War in its fight against the US.⁹ Additionally, it has deployed troops to the Arab nations to fight Israel, and more recently, it supplied Hamas with munitions to fight Israel.¹⁰ North Korea is a direct beneficiary of this treaty and the reasons are manifold:

- It serves its domestic interests as well as its military-technical requirements.
- The closer allied partnership with Russia strengthens its bargaining power vis-à-vis China (its oldest ally) and create a tough ground for future negotiations with US under the Trump administration.
- A strong and *not-so-isolated* North Korea, with the help of strong allies like Russia and China might poses a direct threat to South Korea as well as geographically closer countries like Japan.

On another note, strategic analysts arguing the case of Russia opines that the decision to incorporate North Korean troops shows the weakness of Russia as a declining global power. However, Russia wants to reduce the burden on its soldiers. As of now, the situation appears to be a win-win for both sides, but the real test of the partnership remains to be seen once the war ends. Keen watchers of the Russia-Ukraine war also argue that North Korea's support towards Russia is not going to help drastically in changing the situation on the battlefield in the Kursk region. The main driving point for Russia at present is the growing isolation from the West with heavy sanctions. However, the dynamics are much more complex as NATO members like Slovakia have shown interest in engagements with Russia as these nations depend on Russia for winter gas supplies. Keeping NATO intact is also emerging as a challenge for the West, primarily because of the following reasons:

- The world order is undergoing a transformation, as US President Trump has already shown reservations on America being part of NATO.

- European countries remain hugely dependent on Russia for its energy supplies, thus delinking such relationship is a huge task in the short-to-long term.

The relationship between Russia and North Korea after the disintegration of the Soviet Union has been uneven, with the former getting close to the West. Against the backdrop of Russia's offensive against Ukraine, Russia-North Korea ties have rejuvenated in the form of this newly formed partnership. However, Russia's commitment to fight alongside North Korean troops in case war breaks out on the Korean peninsula is a cause of concern.

While North Korea seeks long-term engagements with Russia, how far the relationship will endure in the long run remains to be seen. There have been more casualties of North Korean troops as well, but one answer is clear the war is not going to end until and unless there is a permanent solution, as Putin has indicated that the solution lies only in 'lasting peace'. Initially, North Korea dispatched around 10,000 soldiers to join Russia. It attempted to conceal the identities of North Korean soldiers in the beginning, but the South Korean Intelligence Agency verified that North Korean forces were present on Russian territory under false identities. Later, Dmytro Ponomarenko, Ukraine's ambassador to South Korea, accounted that the number of troops stationed in the Russian territory have reached 15,000 in the recent months.¹¹ The newly elected US President Donald Trump President has already echoed the idea to bring Russia-Ukraine war to an end on various occasions even before he assumed power. As the evidence suggests, Trump has chosen a National Security Advisor, Mike Waltz, who has sought the end of the war in a responsible manner. Trump's special envoy to Ukraine and Russia, Keith Kellogg,¹² in April 2024, expressed that "bringing the Russia-Ukraine war to a close will require strong, America first leadership to deliver a peace deal and immediately end the hostilities between the two warring parties". South Korea, US security ally, is already wary of the North Korean troop's involvement in Russia's fight against Ukraine.¹³

The China Factor

China's role in the Russia-Ukraine war has been low-key as it has shown negligible interest in North Korea's troop deployment in Russian territory. However, China's relationship with its 'all-weather friend' Russia, during the war has been notable. China

continues to support Russia's economy and supplies vital parts to its defence industry, demonstrating its strong commitment to the country's military needs.¹⁴ China is opposed to Russia's defeat as it views Russia as a strategic deterrent to US dominance. By supplying US\$300 million worth of dual-use materials required for Russia's weapons manufacture, China is already playing a significant role in supporting Russia's defence industrial base and lessening the effects of economic sanctions.¹⁵

Lessons for India

The war has impacted nations all across the globe and India is no exception. India's response towards war has drawn continued criticism from the West due to its reservations to condemn Russia's actions openly and its import of Russian oil despite heavy Western sanctions. Nonetheless, India's policy of 'non-alignment' and its position of neutrality has played a significant role in handling the ongoing crisis. India being the largest democracy with its clear approach to suggest dialogue and diplomacy seems to be the paramount solution for attaining peace. India has been indirectly affected because of its heavy reliance on Russia for its defence infrastructure and defence equipment procurement. Against this backdrop, it becomes imperative for India to diversify its defence partnerships, strengthen its self-reliance initiatives and enhance defence expenditures. With the usage of advanced military techniques by Russia and Ukraine against each other, India should also ponder upon modifying its warfare techniques in order to be better prepared for advanced warfighting in multiple domains. In terms of engagement, New Delhi's opening of Indian embassy in Pyongyang is well perceived as a strategic decision for future deliberations. Under the current scenario, India does not seem to be directly affected, but it needs to be prepared as the next front of war threat clouds in the Indo-Pacific due to the intensifying US-China competition.

Conclusion

In the present context, North Korean troops have been withdrawn from the Kursk region due to the large casualties.¹⁶ However, this move might be temporary. Perceived as tough and fierce, North Korean soldiers in the present scenario seem to be ill-prepared and not fully equipped to fight against Western tactics. The increasing North Korean advancements with Russia's support pose broader implications for global

nuclear security, non-proliferation efforts and future security guarantees in East Asia as well as the broader Indo-Pacific region. The Russia-Ukraine war has strengthened the bilateral relations between North Korea and Russia with their shared animosity against the West. With the involvement of the North Korean soldiers in the Russia-Ukraine war, the Indo-Pacific theatre and Europe are now interlinked; thus, it poses security threats for this region as well.

Sending North Korean troops to fight against Ukraine serves as a win-win situation for both Russia-North Korea as:

- North Korea is fully aware that the presence of a comparatively small number of NK troops cannot decisively alter the consequences of the battlefield, thus can be perceived as a 'strategic and opportune move' by North Korean leader Kim Jong-Un.
- Putin is probably finding hard time to bring mobilised Russian troops on the battlefield. In this background, this friendly fire incident is tragic and might be a potential strain on the Russia-North Korea relationship. However, North Korea has emerged as one of the most significant and important allies in Russia's fight against Ukraine.

Against this backdrop, such troop deployments in long term military battles pose threat to the lives of soldiers and risk inexperienced ally collaborations. Russia's options seem narrow in terms of strengthening alternative alliances, with North Korea being one of the few significant partners other than China. However, in the long term, an increase in the heavy casualties could also lead to a rethinking of the long-term troop deployment in Russia's fight against Ukraine.

DISCLAIMER

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Endnotes

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