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Russia holds the key to the last nuclear puzzle

The North Korea-Russia honeymoon continues. North Korean leader Kim Jong-un is expected to arrive at Vladivostok by train on Monday for a summit with Russian President Vladimir Putin on the sidelines of the Eastern Economic Forum (EEF). The two countries established a de facto alliance after striking the Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance in 1961, but after the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991, Russia was hardly a military ally of North Korea despite their economic cooperation. But the Ukraine war changed it all.

After the war turned into a war of attrition demanding tens of thousands of artillery shells a day, Russia could not meet the demand. The Iskander short-range ballistic missiles ran out of stock just three months after the breakout of the war. Even the Shahed-136 kamikaze drones Russia imported from Iran are being produced in Russia on license. A bigger problem was a critical lack of shells for conventional artillery. Russia found the answer in North Korea, which has stockpiled massive copycats of Russian weapons since the Soviet era to brace for a war in the Korean Peninsula. Despite UN sanctions, Russia purchased ammunition from North Korea to provide them to the Wagner Group. Even amid the Ukraine war, Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu attended North Korea's Victory Day military parade in July and toured a military exhibition center in Pyongyang with Kim to find weapons and other military equipment to be used against Ukraine.

Ammo are just a part of what Russia needs. Russia can import many weapons such as large ballistic missiles and shoulder-fired anti-tank missiles from North Korea. North Korea successfully copied Russia's Iskander missiles to embody their pull-up maneuvers for its KN-23 and KN-24 short-range ballistic missiles. The North has also been deploying its mass-produced 600-millimeter "super-large caliber" multiple rocket launchers for real battles since last year. Simply put, relatively cheap yet advanced North Korean weapons can be used in the battlefields of the war in Ukraine.

On North Korea's part, it can gain much from the formalization of its military cooperation with Russia. First of all, the North can buy cutting-edge conventional weapons that it can't make on its own from Russia. For instance, North Korea can bring in Russia's Su-35 fighter jets in exchange for its arms sales, just like Iran did. It could also introduce Russian spy satellites to replace its failed Mallikong satellites — and even put them onto a Russian space rocket.

North Korea also can upgrade its existing weapons. The most-advanced fighter jets for its Air Force are over 50 Mig-29s it introduced in the late 1980s. But due to a lack of replacement parts, the Air Force addressed the problem by “digging a hole to fill another.” If Russia can export core components, North Korea can greatly enhance its Air Force's capability. Or Russia can allow North Korea to use its high orbit satellite navigation system, called Glonass, for military purposes. In that case, North Korea can fire ballistic and cruise missiles at targets more precisely than before.

If Russia moves on to transfer nuclear technology and nuclear forces operation experience to North Korea, the situation gets more serious. Despite Kim's proclamation of the “completion of nuclear power,” whether North Korean intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) will reach the U.S. mainland is not clear as they have not been fired at a normal angle. And due to a lack of the multiple warhead technology, the ICBMs will most likely be intercepted before reaching the continental United States.

The North's submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs) still have a shorter shooting range than the standards, and it does not have a nuclear-powered sub. But Russia, with 4,489 warheads on its hands, holds the key to inserting the final piece of the nuclear puzzle facing North Korea. So far, Russia has not transferred its nuclear technology to foreign countries. But in the fast-changing geopolitics, anything is possible.

The Russo-North cooperation will likely expand to a joint military exercise beyond the level of weapons trade. During his visit to Pyongyang, Russian Defense Minister Shoigu reportedly proposed to Kim that North Korea participate in the joint Russia-China military drill, apparently to draw it to their joint front against the tripartite security cooperation among South Korea, the United States and Japan.

Russia could start with bringing North Korea to its joint drill at sea with China. Russia and China have already coordinated their military strategy through their joint marine drill in July. The North Korean navy based on small torpedo boats cannot participate in such an exercise at sea. But it certainly can after reinforcing its naval force with four over-1,000-ton class corvettes. Its Air Force can join the drill, too. We can imagine a scene with North Korean fighter jets

escorting Russian strategic bombers over the East Sea, just like our F-15 or KF-16 fighter jets escort B-1B strategic bombers during their joint drills.

The question is whether China will agree to North Korea joining its joint exercise with Russia. To the Victory Day military parade in Pyongyang, China sent Li Hongzhong, vice chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, not a member of the powerful Politburo Standing Committee of the Communist Party of China. That was in stark contrast to Russia, which sent its defense minister even amid the Ukraine war. As a result, the North Korean media reported every move of the Russian defense minister with fanfare in Pyongyang, but not so for Li. Would China let North Korea join its joint drill with Russia at the cost of international criticism against the exercise?

The North-Russia military cooperation is a shocking development shaking the foundation of peace in the Korean Peninsula. We must prepare for the possibility of North Korea arming itself with Russia's advanced weapons or substantially ratcheting up its military power by upgrading existing weapons. If the North's KN-23, 24 or 25 short-range missiles are deployed in the Ukraine war — and if North Korea obtains real data from the battlefields — its nuclear and missile attack capability toward South Korea will be strengthened exponentially. If the cash or oil North Korea would receive from Russia in return for selling weapons is used to further develop its nuclear weapons, that poses a clear and present danger to us.

The government must engage in aggressive diplomacy. It must let Pyongyang and Moscow recognize that we will strongly respond to their weapons trade and military cooperation as it means they have crossed the line and that we in turn will supply Ukraine with cutting-edge weapons and support an international campaign to punish the Russian president as a war criminal. We also need to block the formation of the tripartite alliance from the start. We need to dissuade China — the weakest link here — from agreeing to the dangerous alliance. Seoul must convince Beijing of its security threat from hundreds of nuclear weapons in North Korea. Our government must persuade China to realize that a North Korea without nukes can rather serve as a buffer zone China wants to sustain. The government must urge China and Russia to play their due role as permanent members of the UN Security Council and responsible members of the international community. Our proactive diplomacy is needed more than ever.

* The view expressed herein was published on September 9 in the *JoongAng Sunday* and does not necessarily reflect the views of the Asan Institute for Policy Studies