

Is Russia Instigating a Second Korean War?

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CHOI Kang
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On September 13, Russian President Vladimir Putin met with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un for the second time since April 2019 at the Vostochny Cosmodrome. The meeting is the result of converging interests between Russia, which is having difficulty securing military supplies such as artillery shells in the Ukraine war, and North Korea, which needs sponsors in the economic and military sectors due to long-standing international sanctions. The meeting has drawn international criticism for uniting two authoritarian regimes that undermines the global order. In particular, Russia should reconsider whether the North Korea-Russia summit befits the responsibilities and stature of a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council.

History has proven that close ties between Russia and North Korea brings about conflict and destruction, not world peace. This July, as North Korea marked the 70th anniversary of the Korean War Armistice Agreement, known as 'Victory Day' in North Korea, a message from Putin to Kim Jong Un stated, "The former Soviet Union made a significant contribution to the defeat of the enemy during the Korean War," even though the former Soviet Union did not acknowledge its involvement or support for North Korea during the Korean War. Since the establishment of the North Korean army, the former Soviet Union exerted substantial influence on North Korea's military advancement through sending advisors for military and technology training of more than 10,000 North Korean soldiers; the provision of a wide array of weaponry such as aircraft, tanks, and artillery; and Stalin's final approval for North Korea's invasion of South Korea. The former Soviet Union's involvement in the Korean War was first officially acknowledged in documents delivered by Russian President Boris Yeltsin to South Korean President Kim Young-sam in 1994, but since then, Russia has avoided discussing this matter. However, through Putin's message, Russia has now admitted the former Soviet Union's involvement in the Korean War through supporting North Korea.

When North Korea started the invasion of South Korea at 4 a.m. on June 25, 1950, the United States convened the United Nations Security Council within 23 hours and the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 82 noting with “grave concern the armed attack on the Republic of Korea by forces from North Korea” and calling for the immediate withdrawal of North Korean forces above the 38th parallel. Resolution 83, passed on June 27, recommended that UN member states support South Korea “to restore international peace and regional security.” Resolution 84 on July 7 established a UN force led by the United States to fight against the North Korean forces. Following these Security Council resolutions, 16 countries, including the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, the Netherlands, Canada, France, New Zealand, the Philippines, Türkiye, Thailand, South Africa, Greece, Belgium, Luxembourg, Ethiopia, and Colombia, sent combat soldiers. Six countries, including Sweden, India, Denmark, Norway, Italy, and Germany provided medical units. The Korean War was a war between the world and illegal invaders.

The former Soviet Union, as a permanent member of the UN Security Council, paradoxically engaged in a conflict against the UN forces. During the Korean War, South Korean military casualties numbered up to 140,000, while civilian casualties, including deaths, wounded, and missing, reached 1 million. The UN forces also suffered casualties, with over 40,700 deaths and 100,000 wounded. After the Incheon Landing on September 15, 1950, which turned the tide against North Korea, Stalin persuaded Mao Zedong, who was hesitant to be involved in the Korean War, to commit Chinese troops. The Korean War was orchestrated by the former Soviet Union from behind the scenes, manipulating North Korea and China. The former Soviet Union bears responsibility for the countless casualties among South Korean soldiers, civilians, and UN forces.

Throughout the second North Korean nuclear crisis in the 2000s, Russia consistently supported North Korea. Despite the fact that North Korea conducted six nuclear tests, which raised tensions on the Korean Peninsula and throughout Northeast Asia, Russia, along with China, consistently obstructed the passage of UN resolutions condemning North Korea or imposing additional sanctions. In March 2022, when North Korea launched the 'Hwasong-17' intercontinental ballistic missile, breaking its self-imposed moratorium on launches, the United States introduced new sanctions resolutions in May.

However, Russia and China exercised their veto power to block these resolutions. Even during the UN Security Council meeting convened in July this year in response to North Korea's 'Hwasong-18' launch, Russia and China prevented even a resolution of condemnation, let alone sanctions. In fact, Russia, during the International Security Conference held in Moscow in August, attributed responsibility for tensions on the Korean Peninsula and the Asia-Pacific region to the United States and its allies, South Korea and Japan, thus providing cover for North Korea.

The North Korea-Russia leaders' summit raises the concern of possibility that the already dangerous deal between Pyongyang and Moscow could become more explicit. If Russia receives a large supply of munitions and military equipment from North Korea to use in the Ukraine war as feared by the international community, this would be a violation of UN Security Council Resolution 1718, which prohibits conventional arms trade with North Korea in response to its October 2006 nuclear test. Putin's expressed intention to support North Korea's military reconnaissance satellite development poses a significant risk, as it could assist North Korea in completing its intercontinental ballistic missile program. This will undermine the foundation of the international non-proliferation regime and potentially instigate a second Korean War.

If Russia provides support to North Korea related to satellites, intercontinental ballistic missiles, or nuclear-powered submarines, we should go beyond the extended deterrence measures that have been discussed to date and seek the redeployment of tactical nuclear weapons and nuclear sharing options. To uphold "peace through strength," one must have the power that others fear. Paradoxically, the redeployment of tactical nuclear weapons could pave the way for denuclearization on the Korean Peninsula. In other words, if North Korea takes steps toward denuclearization, we could withdraw our deployed tactical nuclear weapons accordingly.

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