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Signals in the Noise: North Korea's Participation in the Russian Invasion of Ukraine as a Catalyst for Europe-South Korea Cooperation

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Introduction

Since its beginning in February 2022, the Ukraine conflict has undergone a range of twists and turns, including the deployment of North Korean military forces into Russian combat operations. This represents an unanticipated—though logical in hindsight—evolution in the increasingly collaborative support network for Russia's military campaign, encompassing China, Iran, North Korea, and Belarus. The presence of North Korean military personnel on Russian soil marks the first instance where East Asian forces have become direct participants in European hostilities.

In spite of the seemingly unprecedented nature of this development, North Korea's entanglement in the war in Ukraine is in fact yet another demonstration of just how intertwined Europe and Asia are to the few that still consider them as separate and distinct security theatres. This includes the US administration and its prioritisation of China as its focus for strategic competition. Trump's goal of peace at almost any cost and the seeming disdain of his administration for Washington's traditional European allies has urged the latter to set out their "principles" for a peace deal between Ukraine and Russia including the now well-worn lines that "there can be no negotiations on Ukraine without Ukraine" and, rather forlornly, that "there can be no negotiations that affect European security without Europe's involvement."¹ For the avoidance of any doubt regarding their position, the EU leaders have stressed that "Ukraine's, Europe's, transatlantic and global security are intertwined."² In light

of Trump's efforts at accelerating a resolution to the crisis through direct talks with Putin, questions abound regarding how developments in the Indo-Pacific could be impacted by the kind of deal to conclude the war in Ukraine could be cut.³

This *Asan Issue Brief* looks at the DPRK piece of the Russia-Ukraine war puzzle arguing that North Korea's participation in the conflict should serve as a catalyst for closer ROK-Europe and NATO cooperation with particular emphasis on the cyber and information realm. The discussion begins with an overview of the strategic realignment between Pyongyang and Moscow spurred by the latter's invasion of Ukraine. From there, the brief explores the ways in which the EU has reacted to this adamant manifestation of growing interlinkages between theirs and the Indo-Pacific security landscape. It then delves into one of the less explored but nonetheless significant components of the war in Ukraine: cyber and information warfare—an area of operation favoured by both North Korea and Russia, and one that represents a significant threat vector to Europe and South Korea. Finally, the Issue Brief closes by offering a suite of policy recommendations that the EU, NATO, and ROK officials should consider to effectively address the challenges stemming from North Korea-Russia rapprochement.

Escalating North Korea-Russia Cooperation

When Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine started in 2022, Pyongyang's extensive involvement alongside Moscow could hardly be expected. Nevertheless, the DPRK moved quickly to take advantage of the eroding liberal international order and was one of only three countries to recognize the two separatist regions of Donetsk and Luhansk.⁴ The war in Ukraine rekindled Moscow-Pyongyang relations following years of mutual disinterest and shifting priorities on the part of both countries in the aftermath of the Soviet Union's collapse. At first, North Korea limited its support to artillery shells and ballistic missile supplies. The Center for Advanced Defense Studies (C4ADS) reported that between August 2023 and January 2024, North Korea may have sent Russia approximately 1.6 million artillery shells.⁵ On April 3, 2025, US Army General Christopher Cavoli, NATO's Supreme Allied Commander in Europe, testified before the Senate Armed Services Committee that Washington expects Russia to produce 250,000 artillery shells monthly "which puts it on track to build a stockpile three times greater than the United States and Europe combined".⁶ In light of this, North Korean supplies have arguably helped refill depleted Russian artillery capabilities, allowing Russian troops to continue exerting additional pressure to break through opposing lines and repel Ukrainian offensives while domestic production capacity increase was still underway.

During his visit to Pyongyang in June 2024, Vladimir Putin signed a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Treaty with Kim Jong Un that paved the way for regular high-level meetings between North Korean and Russian officials. The recurrence of these exchanges has led some observers to reconsider initial assessments of the future of this rapprochement

to the point that instead of being a transactional commitment of little use to Putin's postwar aims, Russia-North Korea ties may be here to stay.⁷ Military cooperation between the two nations has intensified dramatically. The continued inflow of North Korean arms deliveries has been supplemented by boots on the ground. By last December, Kim Jong Un committed roughly 11,000 troops to the border area, according to the South Korean Joint Chiefs of Staff, and an additional 3,000 soldiers were deployed as reinforcements in the first two months of this year.⁸ Since March, North Korean manpower has been identified by Ukrainian forces operating in Kursk as the lynchpin in Russian counteroffensive operations to retake the occupied region and deny Kyiv from using it as a potential trade during peace negotiations while sparing Putin from mobilizing additional Russian forces.⁹ Finally, in the last days of April, North Korea and Russia shifted their official positions and confirmed Pyongyang's deployment of troops to support Putin's war efforts.¹⁰

It is not entirely clear yet what the North Koreans have been getting in return. Open-source reporting indicates that in addition to food, oil, and economic aid, Russians have supplied or are willing to supply Pyongyang with technologies to further progress in its space, missile, and nuclear programs. But beyond material gains from their Russian counterparts, the North Korean regime has also undoubtedly been acquiring valuable military insights. Alongside having the opportunity to test the performance of its weapons systems on the battlefield, the Korean People's Army is also gaining experience in high-end combat which has been missing given the last time it fought a large-scale conventional war was during the Korean War. Although Pyongyang has been involved in conflicts in third countries in the past - North Korean pilots helped North Vietnam in the 1960s, for example¹¹ - never before has the Kim regime sent ground forces to an external war, all the more reason, in a conflict on which North Korea's survival does not depend. The thousands of North Korean soldiers in Kursk are reportedly being trained by Russian instructors on artillery, drones, and trench warfare for combat operations in the region thereby getting a closeup understanding of how the character of war has evolved in the context of a modern and technologically advanced battlefield.¹² Markus Garlauskas pointed out that North Korea has drawn important strategic lessons beyond the tactical edge from how Russia has leveraged nuclear threats to deter stronger responses from Ukraine's more powerful allies with very limited consequences.¹³ From a Korean Peninsula perspective, the most worrying scenario is that Kim Jong Un may feel empowered, on the one hand, and emboldened, on the other, to try to escalate tensions based on the assumption that nuclear posturing combined with Chinese and Russian backing could shield it from severe international repercussions. All the more so, considering that Russia has undermined the UN sanctions regime against North Korea by shutting down the UN Panel of Experts and vetoing all new drafted resolutions.¹⁴

The European Reactions

Days after the Western intelligence services confirmed that North Korean troops had been sent to Russia, President Volodymyr Zelenskyy lamented a lack of proportional reaction to the issue by Ukraine's supporters, stating in a briefing that "We are seeing an increase in

North Koreans but, unfortunately, not an increase in our partners' response".¹⁵ Ukraine Foreign Minister Andrii Sybigha similarly urged European allies to turn their eyes to "North Korean troops waging an aggressive war in Europe against a sovereign European state. This proves once again that while the West is afraid of and hesitates, Russia is acting and going for escalation."¹⁶ For Kyiv, the immediate reaction from its partners to direct involvement by DPRK troops in the conflict has been one of strong words but not necessarily corresponding action. Indeed, it took until November 20 before the UK gave a green light to Kyiv's use of long-range Storm Shadow missiles to strike North Korean forces following then-US President Biden's permission to the use of long-range Army Tactical Missile Systems in Russian territory.¹⁷

On November 28, the European Parliament adopted a resolution highlighting that North Korea's sending of troops and testing of ballistic missiles represents "a new phase of warfare" and are "a new risk to the security of Europe as a whole."¹⁸ In December, the EU and U.S. imposed sanctions directly in response to the deployment of North Korean troops engaged in combat operations against Ukrainian forces. Nonetheless, since early 2023 North Korea as well as Belarus, Iran, and China have been targeted by Western sanctions for their support to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Among the North Korean individuals and state-affiliated entities included are the DPRK Defence Minister and the deputy chief of the General Staff of the Korean People's Army, and more recently Lee Chang Ho, presumed head of the Reconnaissance General Bureau, due to his alleged active involvement in cyber operations and information warfare targeting Ukraine as well as for orchestrating and coordinating North Korean troops deployment.¹⁹

Targeting third-country support occurs within the broader context of the EU's sanctions against Russia, which has transformed from narrowly focused measures following the 2014 annexation of Crimea into the most comprehensive autonomous sanctions program ever implemented by the bloc. This evolution reflects not only the EU's strategic response to what it considers an unprecedented existential security threat on the continent but also signals a fundamental shift in its institutional dynamics, with the European Commission assuming greater influence throughout the sanctions process. Although this has been a common pattern in security crises, the conflict in Ukraine has produced a unifying effect that transcends traditional state-centric approaches to security challenges, coalescing member states' support for collective action under the Commission's guidance, with sanctions policy serving as a prime example.

Aside from imposing primary and secondary sanctions on Moscow and its supporters to increase the costs of dragging on the war, Brussels' response has focused on the need to work with allies and partners to effectively address the challenges stemming from Russia-North Korea alignment. The prolonged conflict has further cemented the pattern of the EU and NATO's deepening diplomatic and security ties with South Korea "grounded in common interests" and in shared global threat perceptions, "notably Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea's (DPRK) nuclear and missile

programs, as well as multi-dimensional challenges”. After issuing the obvious (and necessary) condemnation “in the strongest possible terms” of North Korea’s transfer of weapons to Russia and the deployment of special forces to help the Kremlin with its “unlawful war of aggression” against Ukraine,²⁰ then-EU High Representative *Borrell* and ROK Foreign Minister Cho signed the EU-ROK *Security and Defence Partnership* during the first-ever EU-ROK Foreign Ministers’ Strategic Dialogue on November 4. As a result of the new partnership, the two sides’ consultations on security and defence have been elevated to yearly Director-General/EU Managing Director discussions. The EU Security and Defence Partnership with South Korea brings the total number of such agreements to six alongside the ones with Norway, Moldova, Albania, Japan, and North Macedonia. These tailored security arrangements have emerged following the adoption of the EU Strategic Compass framework in March 2022, which identified ‘partnering’ as one of four essential pillars for strengthening the EU’s security and defence together with ‘acting’ (operational capabilities), ‘securing’ (resilience building), and ‘investing’.

Turning to individual member states’ reactions, a survey of parliamentary debates in Southern and Western Europe reveals that the prevailing trend has been that of a very limited discussion about how Pyongyang’s military presence on Europe’s doorstep matters for European security interests. It can be argued that the escalation brought by North Korea’s involvement in the conflict holds different levels of salience in South Korea and Europe. While observers in South Korea focus on the insights it could offer into inter-Korean military contingencies including the question on whether Russia would reciprocate and provide assistance to North Korean adventurism on the Korean Peninsula, the development of North Korean troops being deployed to Russia has been merely ‘acknowledged’ in the domestic political debates across Europe including in those countries that are the biggest supporters of Ukraine, namely the UK and France. In the case of the former, where discussions have been more pronounced, public Parliamentary debates such as the one of 18 November 2024 in the House of Commons highlight that the emphasis remains on how DPRK support has enhanced the ability of Russia as an aggressor more so than the inherent threat posed by North Korea itself.²¹

Even in a frontline country like Poland, one could talk of a disconnect between the executive and legislative branches of government and their respective foci. On the one hand, the issue of military cooperation between the DPRK and Russia has been frequently commented by Foreign Minister Radosław Sikorski and has been included in the 2025-2028 action plans for the implementation of the Polish-Japanese and Polish-South Korean strategic partnerships signed respectively in February and March this year. On the other hand, the lower house of the parliament (Sejm) of which the majority is constituted of parties opposed to Donald Tusk’s administration has “adopted a resolution condemning the start of Russia’s full-scale aggression against Ukraine but no resolutions condemning North Korea’s cooperation with Russia”.²² It should be noted that as of this writing, the most frequently debated issue in parliament has not been North Korean support for Russia, but Poland’s arms cooperation

with South Korea with details of contracts being frequent topics of discussion during plenary and committee sessions.

In spite of limited reactions in public debates across Europe, North Korea's military assistance to Russia is likely to have repercussions on possible European diplomatic re-engagement of Pyongyang. Diplomacy with North Korea has been deadlocked for several years, however, following the deployment of thousands of North Korean soldiers to support Russia's military campaign, chances of overtures from European nations are even lower. Germany is a case in point. The Federal Foreign Office has strongly condemned this issue publicly and summoned the DPRK acting ambassador. More recently, the director general for Asia and the Pacific, Frank Hartmann, confirmed that Berlin will not be reopening its embassy in Pyongyang as long as the war endures "Due to the North Korean military engagement in the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine".²³ This comes in spite of a previous expression of interest in the context of a German delegation visit to North Korea in February 2024 to inspect the condition of the embassy, which marked the first visit by European staff since before the pandemic. More significant will be the consequences for contacts at the Track 1.5 and Track 2 level, which have constituted meaningful channels in the past to facilitate dialogue amid spiking tensions. Having examined European reactions to North Korea's involvement in the Ukraine conflict, we now turn to examine one overlooked facet of this development, the role of cyber and information and warfare.

Stepping up cooperation in the cyber realm

The recently signed EU-ROK Security and Defence Partnership has identified cyber cooperation as one of the key areas of focus building on and further expanding the already existing EU-ROK Digital Partnership Agreement and high-level Cyber Dialogue. It also complements South Korea's strong cybersecurity partnerships with several EU member states such as the Netherlands and Poland with which Seoul has carried out intensive intelligence cooperation to monitor Pyongyang-Moscow evolving ties. This renewed emphasis on cyber cooperation on the part of Brussels and Seoul should not come as a surprise considering that cyber and information warfare have been officially identified in the DPRK-Russia Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (articles 10, 15, 18, 20) as another avenue for their collaboration.²⁴ In March 2025, North Korea-linked threat actors Moonstone Sleet were identified as having access to and utilising the Russian malware programme Qilin, which is thus far the only instance of North Korea deploying non-indigenous ransomware as part of their cyber operations.²⁵ Moreover, North Korea has extended its backing of Russia's war efforts from military support to direct cyber operations as hacking groups operating under the auspices of TA406 (also known as Opal Sleet and Konni) have reportedly carried out a sophisticated phishing campaign aimed at collecting strategic intelligence from Ukrainian government agencies in an apparent effort to discern strategic battlefield information and inform decision-making as to troop deployments to Russia.²⁶ While further study and monitoring is still required for confirmation, information warfare specialists have made the case that there is a high likelihood that Pyongyang is also drawing important lessons

from Moscow's weaponisation of cyber assets to sabotage, disrupt, and influence its opponents in Ukraine and the West more broadly.²⁷ Successful Russian information warfare attacks on Ukrainian critical infrastructure have thus far included disruption of telecommunications systems such as the attack on ViaSat in February 2022,²⁸ breaching databases containing the personal data of Ukrainian citizens,²⁹ and the takedown or defacement of Ukrainian government websites.³⁰ A more recent attempt to disrupt Ukraine's national rail systems has been unsuccessful but nevertheless highlights the sophistication and scale of the Russian toolkit. Additionally, Russian-linked groups have taken the fight to Western allies such as a 2024 attack on water treatment facilities in the United States, France, and Poland.³¹ All of these examples are potentially replicable and can be added to the DPRK's own cyberwarfare playbook which has thus far been focussed on searching for and exploiting vulnerabilities within South Korean systems in terms of actions on the Korean Peninsula and generating foreign currency for the regime in the case of international operations.³²

While North Korea may leverage its military aid to improve Pyongyang's cyber threat posture through expanded cooperation with Russia, Moscow has strategically used the involvement of North Korean soldiers as a component of its information warfare against Ukraine and Western nations. In late 2024, reports on the presence of North Korean soldiers to support Russia's military efforts in Ukraine were accompanied by a flurry of conflicting narratives and misinformation from many quarters. Initially, some European counter-disinformation organs labelled the news as Russian disinformation.³³ Russian official channels and media outlets denied Pyongyang's involvement and used the hype generated by the news of their deployment to pollute the Western information space, creating confusion and fear on the frontlines by submerging Ukraine's government bodies, which are tasked with detecting and countering disinformation, through the so-called 'background noise' tactic.³⁴ Later, when the presence of North Korean troops was confirmed by Western intelligence officials,³⁵ the Kremlin kept dismissing reports and public statements as a "canard",³⁶ in the words of Dmitry Peskov, fabricated by pro-Kiev propaganda. Nonetheless, Ukrainian authorities had already engaged in psychological campaigns targeting North Korean soldiers. In November, Kyiv's military intelligence stepped up campaign efforts to encourage North Korean soldiers to defect, spreading messages offering safety and support in case of surrender with no intention to stop.³⁷ The situation was further complicated by the dissemination of social media content—deemed as largely staged or edited—regarding the presence of Pyongyang's troops supposedly circulated by Russian or pro-Russian sources in order to fuel confusion and distract attention from real developments.³⁸

Outlook and Policy Recommendations

The continued presence of active DPRK armed forces personnel in Russia warrants closer attention from the European side not only because of the possibility of these troops' deployment far beyond Kursk hence in Ukraine itself and the need to address their involvement when the time for peace negotiations comes, but also because it can encourage

Pyongyang and Moscow to deepen their ties in less tested areas of cooperation. North Korea's participation in the Ukraine War can and must serve as a catalyst for closer South Korea-Europe cooperation as both sides navigate through increasingly complicated regional and global contexts. Given that North Koreans are gaining valuable military lessons on modern warfare both on the ground and in cyberspace through their multipronged contribution to the Kremlin war effort, there is a pressing need for Europe and NATO to enhance practical cooperation with South Korean partners in order to implement their shared security agenda. All the more so given the continuing uncertainty about where the conflict is headed given several abortive attempts at peace negotiations as driven by the Trump administration. In this vein, this *Issue Brief* offers the following policy recommendations:

First, accelerating and deepening bilateral and multilateral defence industrial cooperation efforts. The focus of the European Commission and the United Kingdom on engaging in strategic rearmament in the face of the United States becoming an increasingly unreliable partner presents an opportunity for integrating Europe-South Korea ties even further. Building on the 2024 EU-ROK Defence and Security Partnership, Brussels and Seoul should go beyond the current emphasis on discussion and information exchange regarding defence industrial matters and engage in practical cooperation particularly relating to research and development, supply chains and logistics, and materiel production. While the 2025 Security Action for Europe (SAFE) programme spearheaded by President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen is predominantly focussed on the European defence industry, technology transfer and localised production agreements represent a potential win-win scenario in terms of allowing for South Korean involvement while at the same time strengthening the European defence industrial base. As seen on the occasion of the ROK Defense Acquisition Program Administration (DAPA) Minister Seok Jong-gun's meetings with senior officials from both the EU and NATO last April in Brussels—the first time for a DAPA chief—following his visits to Norway, Romania and Sweden, Seoul has the political capital and the capabilities to step up as a reliable and timely supplier of NATO-compatible gears to partners seeking to modernise and/or expand their defence capabilities in the face of Russian intransigence and U.S. detachment. A focus on NATO member-states in close geographical proximity to Russia such as new member-states Finland and Sweden alongside longer-term members such as Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, and Romania should prove a productive way forward not only in assisting in national, European, and international security arrangements but enhance South Korea's values-based partnership with its European counterparts and bring them closer together.

Second, expanding the EU's focus in the realm of information and cyber warfare beyond Russia and China and developing tailored responses and countermeasures to third threat vectors such as North Korea. In recent years, considerable efforts have been made by EU institutions and member states to enhance situational awareness regarding Countering Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI) activities carried out by actors sponsored particularly by Russia and China. Less attention has thus far been devoted to the systematic monitoring, identification, and analysis of information

manipulation and interference by other countries including North Korea. In the specific case of Pyongyang, enhanced cooperation with Russia as part of the Ukraine conflict and beyond it could translate into increasing capabilities that can pose a growing direct threat to democratic integrity. In this regard, at the last conference on FIMI held by the European External Action Service in March, DPRK activism in the realm of cyber influence operations was noticeably absent from official discussions.³⁹ Against the backdrop of evolving North Korean cyber capabilities, the EU should deepen its understanding and its own knowledge base of Pyongyang's cognitive warfare threats, which often incorporates FIMI as a tactic and increase its awareness about potential ramifications of Russia-North Korea collusion in relation to European states resilience and security.

Third, leveraging current and ongoing cooperation in military information-sharing to reinforce future mechanisms. The ROK's invitation to participate in the NATO Battlefield Information Collection and Exploitation System (BICES) presents an opportunity for the two partners to develop more effective responses against the Russian-North Korean threat, particularly in relation to deeper and more effective communications channels to share near-real-time intelligence and situational awareness information. This comes at a timely moment between the current period of the NATO-ROK ITPP (2023-2026) and its renewal for the period of 2027-2030 and an expansion of South Korean participation in a wider range of NATO exercises should include scenarios focussing on Russian-North Korean military cooperation. For NATO member-states, Ukraine may only represent the beginning in terms of the threat posed by this renewed relationship. One possible development in the near future if Russia is to apply military pressure on the Baltics—as it is beginning to already in the case of Finland—is the likelihood that it will deploy tried-and-tested tactics like military drills but increasingly with North Korean counterparts in order to maximise coercion. When and how the war in Ukraine ends remains unclear but the eventual post-war settlement will be revealing as to the extent and limit of the relationship between Moscow and Pyongyang going forward. If it goes beyond the 'marriage of convenience', NATO and the ROK should make room for and prioritise adaptive learning and flexible decision-making in order to more effectively deal with possible threats emanating from Russian-North Korean cooperation.

About the Author

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