

Opinion – North Korea's Gambit in the Russia-Ukraine War

Written by Manish Jung Pulami and Saume Saptaparna Nath

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The USA has confirmed 3,000 North Korean soldiers are being deployed in the Russia-Ukraine war and the South Korean intelligence agency suspects 10,000 more to be deployed by December. North Korea's strategic decision to support Russia in the ongoing Ukraine conflict is rooted in a blend of transactional interests and deeper political calculations. As the war extends into its third year, Russia faces pressing needs for skilled manpower, labor, and military supplies, creating an avenue for closer collaboration with North Korea. This relationship has taken on new dimensions, with North Korea reciprocally seeking economic and technological assistance, while Russia benefits from additional reinforcements to support its military objectives.

The June 2023 mutual defense agreement between Moscow and Pyongyang allows for reciprocal military support in the event of an armed invasion, potentially legitimizing the deployment of North Korean forces to reinforce Russia's frontlines. In addition, relatively skilled North Korean troops could enable Russia to redistribute its forces to the south, where it is approaching a breakthrough against Ukrainian defenses in Donetsk. This repositioning could shift the balance near Kursk, potentially leading to advances toward Zaporizhzhia and Dnipro. Any Ukrainian response to the North Korean presence may inadvertently bolster Russia's defenses, as even a limited North Korean deployment would act as a force multiplier for Moscow, further pressuring Ukraine's strained manpower resources, which have now become a greater challenge than material supply.

North Korea's role as a supplier of ammunition and equipment to Russia has become increasingly vital to Moscow's war effort, filling critical gaps in Russia's military efforts. Beyond material support, North Korea could deploy technical personnel to monitor and repair its equipment, demonstrating multifaceted assistance to Russia's military campaign. Historically, North Korea has deployed troops in conflicts such as the Vietnam and Yom Kippur Wars, although this would be the first time in decades that it has engaged so directly in an overseas conflict. With an initial deployment of 10,000 soldiers, Pyongyang could provide Russia with valuable manpower to supplement its ongoing operations, though such numbers are unlikely to single-handedly sustain Russia's military. North Korea's potential contributions of troops, ammunition, and short-range missiles contrast with the supply difficulties faced by Ukraine's Western allies, highlighting a stark disparity in the capacity of each side's supporters.

From North Korea's perspective, this engagement holds several advantages. The participation in the conflict would provide North Korean forces with critical battlefield experience and technical training, enhancing their operational readiness. North Korea's elite special forces, though relatively inexperienced, could acquire valuable insights into modern combat tactics and infiltration techniques, knowledge that would bolster Pyongyang's military capabilities upon their return. The strengthening of North Korea-Russia ties represents a new level of security coordination between two members of the "axis of upheaval," a coalition of authoritarian states including Russia, China, Iran, and North Korea. Pyongyang's support for Moscow may come with the expectation of expanded military and economic assistance, and there is speculation that this partnership might facilitate advancements in North Korea's nuclear and satellite programs, potentially in violation of UN sanctions. In the same manner that South Korea modernized its military after assisting the United States in Vietnam, North Korea could benefit from aiding Russia in its battle. President Kim will probably be considerably more empowered to adopt an even more assertive stance in and around Korea as a result of North Korea's growing involvement.

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Russia's alliance offers Pyongyang geopolitical leverage, enabling North Korea to diversify its foreign partnerships and reduce its dependence on China, which has had a complex and sometimes ambivalent relationship with the regime. This shift may empower Kim Jong-un to take a more assertive stance in northeast Asia. The psychological impact of North Korean troops on Ukrainian forces, combined with Moscow's increasing international coalition, could serve to intimidate Ukraine and signal Russia's ability to mobilize a range of global supporters. Russia's decision to potentially employ North Korean soldiers is likely a tactical, rather than desperate, measure aimed at consolidating its focus on the eastern front, where it has seen gradual success. This deployment could allow Russia to stabilize its territorial control in Kursk while advancing elsewhere, a maneuver that may gain further momentum as winter strains Ukraine's energy resources and political dynamics in the US creating uncertainties about future Western support.

The implications of North Korea's involvement are potentially far-reaching. A direct combat experience could significantly enhance the strategic competencies of North Korean forces, which may alter the regional balance of power in East Asia and prompt recalibrations in the policies of states such as China, Japan, South Korea and the United States. With North Korea's consistent supply of rockets, missiles, and artillery shells to Russia, Pyongyang's actions symbolize a concerning globalization of the Russia-Ukraine war. These developments may bring South Korea and other Indo-Pacific allies into closer alignment with European theaters of conflict. Consequently, South Korea is likely to deepen its ties with the US-led alliance in the Indo-Pacific and may expand its support for Ukraine, potentially extending into the realm of lethal aid if North Korea's involvement in the conflict continues to grow. In addition to enhancing its military prowess, North Korea's strategic backing of Russia in the conflict in Ukraine challenges the status quo geopolitical order. This emerging alliance has the potential to significantly alter the current political landscape and increase tensions in Northeast Asia.

In the 22-24 October 2024 BRICS summit held in Kazan, Russian President Vladimir Putin pursued two interconnected objectives: a short-term goal to demonstrate his resilience against international criticism for his invasion of Ukraine and a long-term goal to advance a multipolar world order; and a planned message to the West—with President Putin at the backdrop of North Korean soldiers potentially being deployed to Russia to fight Ukraine, showcases a bizarre picture of how a multilateral setting can be exploited. This scene underscores how multilateral platforms like BRICS can be leveraged by leaders to legitimize controversial actions and redirect international narratives, often in ways that serve individual agendas over collective principles. The silence of BRICS leaders on potential military collaboration by Russia with North Korea in the backdrop of the summit reflects a complex geopolitical balancing act, where condemnation risks fracturing alliances, yet inaction suggests tacit approval of power politics over norms of sovereignty. It reveals a multilateral setting vulnerable to exploitation, where members selectively uphold the principles of a multipolar order, sometimes at the cost of addressing pressing ethical and legal concerns.

On one hand, the Kazan Declaration summed up for a more democratic, inclusive, and multipolar world order based on international law and the UN Charter; on the other, President Putin said that any peace deal would have to recognize Russia's control of sections of Ukrainian territory. The Declaration's idealized vision is tested by Russia's direct actions in Ukraine, which contradict the stated commitment to sovereignty and peace. The Declaration notably avoided explicit condemnation of Russia's actions, reflecting a broader ambiguity within BRICS when it comes to confronting members' contentious policies. This diplomatic restraint appears rooted in mutual interests to oppose Western-dominated institutions, showcasing how shared grievances toward Western hegemony can bind nations, even when underlying values differ significantly. As a result, the Declaration's emphasis on multipolarity and "peaceful conflict resolution" risks being seen as symbolic, lacking concrete mechanisms or unified accountability.

The troop movements further complicate the BRICS narrative and cast doubts on the bloc's coherence as a promoter of peace and stability. North Korea's potential involvement highlights a geopolitical realignment where nations like Russia are increasingly turning to nontraditional alliances to secure support, regardless of these allies' reputational risks or potential impacts on global stability. The use of BRICS as a backdrop for these maneuvers suggests an opportunistic exploitation of the multilateral forum for image management, while signaling to the West a rejection of its criticism and sanctions. This scenario raises questions about the limits of multilateral institutions in managing individual member behavior, as they become susceptible to internal divisions that prioritize state interests over collective accountability and legitimacy in global governance.

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The geopolitical implications extend beyond Ukraine, as North Korea's military backing of Russia challenges norms and sanctions, creating potential shifts in East Asia's security balance. Russia's leverage of BRICS as a platform for legitimizing its actions, despite avoiding direct condemnation at the Kazan summit, reveals the forum's susceptibility to exploitation for state-driven agendas, especially by authoritarian regimes. As multilateral institutions struggle to hold members accountable, a growing alignment of authoritarian states is increasingly willing to bypass norms, signaling a polarized geopolitical future and likely prompting Western allies, particularly in the Indo-Pacific to reconsider their defense strategies.

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