The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

North Koreans Fighting for Russia Put Warm Words into Practice

By Anthony V. Rinna

October 21, 2024



North Korean leader Kim Jong Un posing for a photo with soldiers of the Seoul Ryu Kyong Su Guards 105th Tank Division of the Korean People's Army. **KCNA VIA KNS / AFP**

Years of speculation, even within Russia itself, have seemingly ended in a far-fetched proposition appearing to be a reality. In line with recent assessments from South Korea's National Intelligence Service (NIS), emerging media reports indicate that North Korean troops have been sent to Russia to receive military training ahead of a likely deployment to Ukraine.

The deployment of North Korean troops to Ukraine concurrently signals the sincerity with which North Korea and Russia plan to put their recently upgraded military partnership into practice, as well as the latest manifestation of the ever-shrinking distance between the security crises in Eastern Europe and Northeast Asia.

The number of members of the Korean People's Army (KPA) in Russia has been put at

anywhere between 1,500 to 12,000, based on eyewitness accounts and South Korea's own intelligence assessments. There have even been reports that over a thousand of these troops belong to Pyongyang's special forces.

Speculation that the KPA would be deployed to Ukraine stretches back to at least 2022. Far from being a very online fantasy limited to fringe bloggers, media personalities and even policy figures with ties to the Kremlin have repeatedly floated the idea that Pyongyang may provide Russia with military assistance going as far as troops.

To be sure, there was a degree of media coverage of the supposed deployment of North Korean military engineers to help rebuild parts of Ukraine's battered east in June of this year. These particular reports, however, did not stand up to scrutiny at the time.

Related article: North Korea Troop Deployment Locks in Russia Military Alliance

Now, however, the situation is very different.

In fact, the nature of North Korean troops deployment abroad is eerily reminiscent of previous media discourse within Russia. Writing for the Russian media outlet Bloknot, Russian military journalist Aleksandr Pylev argued that a group of North Korean snipers, which would not need to number more than 1,500 troops (similar to the figure provided by the NIS), would be able to help Russian forces make breakthroughs in urban combat.

Similarly, in 2023 Aleksander Sladkov, a member of the Kremlin's mobilization committee, that a source of his in Pyongyang had indicated the North Korean government was prepared to provide boots-on-the-ground assistance.

The concrete groundwork for the KPA's deployment to Ukraine came to fruition in June 2024 when President Vladimir Putin and his North Korean counterpart Kim Jong Un signed an agreement stepping up their military partnership. One of the most eyebrow-raising aspects of this stepping-up in their relationship was the agreement to provide "mutual assistance" if either country is attacked.

Of course, it is not entirely safe to assert that North Korea and Russia have a full-fledged military alliance in the works, with their partnership still being primarily transactional, and one that is even now on shaky ground.

Nevertheless, it is precisely due to the potential pitfalls in North Korea-Russia military cooperation that Pyongyang likely sees an opportunity to make itself useful to Russia in the hopes of getting a proverbial return on investment.

On the surface, it may seem surprising that North Korea, a country that has adopted an increasingly militant stance against South Korea, would want to expend any of its forces in distant Ukraine, particularly given South Korea's vast military superiority over the DPRK.

Nevertheless, as much as North Korea risks losing troops in combat in Ukraine, Pyongyang has reason to sacrifice some of its military forces in Ukraine for a long-term payoff.

Ukraine's own incursion into Russia has proven to be a perfect opportunity for North Korea

and Russia to show how intent they are on making their actions match their words. Should North Korea not have responded to a direct attack on the Russian Federation, it would have been ample ground for the rest of the world to doubt the strength of military ties between Pyongyang and Moscow.

Aside from providing the world with a clear example of the extent to which they are ready to realize the text of their agreement, North Korea is potentially hoping to store up goodwill with Russia in the hopes that the Kremlin will come to Pyongyang's aid if the Korean Peninsula descends into violence.

There are several forms of direct military support to the DPRK that Moscow could provide. One South Korean expert cited the possibility that the Kremlin could deploy its S-400 missile defense system in the Russian Far East to protect North Korea.

Additionally, deploying troops to Ukraine offers members of North Korea's armed forces a chance to gain real combat experience, which would be valuable if active combat with South Korea erupted. A country risking its own troops in distant combat theatres as preparation for waging its own war is not without precedent, as Nazi Germany's participation in the Spanish Civil War shows clearly.

Related article: Russia Courting North Korea Shows Contempt for International Law

However much North Korea may benefit from its deployment to the battlefields of Ukraine, Russia also stands to gain from the additional support in materiel.

But Moscow is running serious risks of its own. By allowing the DPRK to participate in active combat operations, Moscow has opened itself up to a more active South Korean role in security affairs on Russia's western periphery.

Putin has repeatedly warned South Korea not to provide Ukraine with lethal weaponry, lest it "destroy" Seoul's ties with Moscow. Even South Korean military sales to Poland have drawn scorn from Moscow. Seoul has thus far abided by the Kremlin's warnings, limiting its aid to Ukraine to non-lethal military equipment and official development assistance (even as it has found ways to circumvent the Kremlin's admonitions).

Of course, Putin's visit to North Korea this year seemed to indicate a willingness to do serious damage to Russia-South Korea relations. Nevertheless, with a country South Korea's defense establishment officially labeled an enemy now engaged in combat operations, Seoul has even less reason than before not to arm Ukraine directly.

Likewise, South Korea has less of a reason to view its ties with Russia as being separate from the great power conflict between Moscow and Washington, particularly in East Asia.

The extent to which North Korea's efforts to build political capital with Russia will yield any benefits for Pyongyang is unknowable at this point. One thing that North Korea has learned the hard way is that Moscow cannot necessarily be trusted to live up to its commitments. Any outbreak of hostilities on the Korean Peninsula would involve Russia to some extent by sheer virtue of Russia's geographic proximity. Nevertheless, Kim Jong Un likely does not take the

idea that the Kremlin will reciprocate Pyongyang's support for Russia for granted.

All the same, for North Korea to be willing to send elite units to Ukraine shows a degree of confidence, or at least a high tolerance for risk, in terms of the DPRK–Russia relationship. Should North Korean soldiers ultimately see active duty in Ukraine, NATO and South Korea will not forget it. Today, geography no longer separates different security theaters across Eurasia, but unites them.

The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2024/10/21/north-koreans-fighting-for-russia-put-warm-words-into-practice-a86762