



CONGRESSIONAL
AFFAIRS
January 2025



COUNTERING NORTH KOREA AS IT DEEPENS MILITARY COOPERATION WITH RUSSIA

BY NAOKO AOKI
RAND CORPORATION

North Korea's growing friendship with Russia could yield benefits that empower the Kim Jong-un regime to pursue its strategic objectives more aggressively. To prevent that from happening, the United States needs to signal that its commitment to contribute to South Korea's self-defense remains unchanged. The following discussion assesses the current state of military cooperation between North Korea and Russia and considers options for the United States and South Korea to counter the potential benefits of such cooperation.

The State of Military Cooperation

Pyongyang has been deepening its military cooperation with Moscow since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in early 2022. This cooperation began with North Korean shipments of artillery shells to Russia later that year and expanded to include the signing of a bilateral mutual defense treaty in 2024. North Korea took yet another step to deepen the partnership in late 2024, when the country began sending troops to Russia to help fight the war in Ukraine, marking an unprecedented level of involvement by Pyongyang in an international conflict.

North Korea is likely to benefit from these developments in both tangible and intangible ways. For example, the troop deployment is giving the Korean People's Army combat experience that it has not had in decades. This is the first time since its founding that the country has sent soldiers to a foreign war on a major scale. While suffering heavy losses—the Ukrainian military [believes](#) that North Korea has lost roughly half the 11,000 troops it deployed—North Korean soldiers [are reportedly](#) motivated, disciplined, and good at using small arms. Most importantly, they are learning ways to fight in the modern battlefield, including the use of unmanned aerial vehicles.

The country is likely also gaining knowledge and resources from Russia to further advance its military capabilities in exchange for its contributions to the war. Most ominously, North Korea is believed to be close to obtaining advanced Russian technology that could advance its nuclear and missile programs. Russian space technology could be particularly useful for improving the accuracy of North Korea's intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) program

Naoko Aoki is a Political Scientist at the RAND Corporation who specializes in East Asian security issues.

and help the country launch military reconnaissance satellites into space, which would enhance targeting. Despite its pledge to put three such satellites into orbit in 2024, North Korea failed to achieve this goal.

Additionally, North Korea could believe that stronger military cooperation with Russia will lead to less outside pressure. Russia has already [vetoed](#) a UN Security Council panel that was monitoring the sanctions imposed on North Korea for its nuclear and ballistic missile programs. Pyongyang may think that such backing could create space in the international arena to pursue its goals more assertively.

Options for Countering Military Cooperation between North Korea and Russia

To counter the potential benefits of North Korea's military cooperation with Russia, the United States should demonstrate its enduring commitment to contribute to South Korea's self-defense. This is because Pyongyang's defense strategy [is focused](#) on deterring U.S. military involvement in a conflict on the Korean Peninsula by trying to convince Washington that such an action would entail unacceptable costs. For this reason, North Korea has invested heavily in ICBMs capable of striking the continental United States. Reiterating that such actions will not diminish U.S. resolve is important both to signal to North Korea that its strategy will not work and to reassure South Korea about the U.S. commitment to the country.

Such reassurance is vitally important because these developments come at a time when North Korea is taking an increasingly aggressive approach toward South Korea. In late 2023, Kim Jong-un [said](#) that his country will not seek reconciliation but will instead treat the southern half of the peninsula as an enemy. This was a significant departure from the regime's previous position, which was to treat South Koreans

as compatriots who should be reunited with North Korea. While this might not mean that the North will try to forcibly take over the South in the near future, it could embolden Pyongyang to try to achieve its political and strategic goals—which include ensuring the survival of the Kim family regime and exercising influence over the entire Korean Peninsula—through [nuclear threats](#) and limited use of military power.

North Korea's deployment of troops to Ukraine also presents an opportunity for the United States and South Korea to learn about how North Korean soldiers fight. The movements of the North Korean troops, reportedly including the elite forces known as the Storm Corps, give clues to their level of training and capabilities. The United States could remind North Korea that it is taking full advantage of this information as one of the potential costs of military adventurism. Such messaging could further allay some of the concerns in South Korea, where in October 2024 over 70% of the public described the deployment of North Korean troops as threatening.

The UN Security Council is unlikely to impose new sanctions on North Korea due to Russian and Chinese support for the country. Nonetheless, the United States can still work not only with its regional allies South Korea and Japan but also with other Western countries to continue signaling to North Korea that its WMD programs and assistance to Russia's invasion of Ukraine are unacceptable.

In sum, while it may not be possible to prevent North Korea from obtaining all the benefits from its military cooperation with Russia, the United States can try to prevent such cooperation from spilling over into a bigger problem. To do so, the United States must show unflinching support for South Korea's defense and work with like-minded partners to signal to North Korea that its destabilizing behavior is unacceptable. ~