

*On the Propaganda and Supply Fronts of the Russia-Ukraine  
War:  
North Korean Soldiers, Workers, and Munitions in the Donbas?*

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In the past summer, there were reports about the possibility of North Korea (Democratic People's Republic of Korea, DPRK) providing 100,000 volunteers to fight with the Russian army in Ukraine as well as construction workers to help reconstruct war-torn areas in the Donbas. These reports, based on Russian sources, became fodder in the propaganda war in Ukraine and resonated in international media and the academic community. Western sources reported a possible supply of North Korean munitions to the Russian army.

This paper will critically assess the three reports in the context of wartime dynamics and in the wider international context. The feasibility of sending North Korean troops, munitions, and workers to Russia will be viewed in light of the latest wartime developments in both Ukraine and Russia, including the retreat of the Russian army in some of the occupied areas, Russian partial mobilization and the annexation of four Ukrainian regions. The international context of evaluation includes the recent history of Russia-North Korea security and economic relations. The essay will argue that sending North Korean soldiers to Ukraine is out of the question, though the dispatch of North Korean workers has some degree of probability. The likeliest possibility is the Russian procurement of North Korean munitions.

*100,000 North Korean soldiers in Ukraine: possible only in a parallel universe*

This is, in short, wishful thinking and a sign of Russian desperation in the propaganda and psychological war over Ukraine. The source of the report about the possibility of North Korea sending volunteers to Ukraine was Russian TV. On 5 August Igor Korochenko, a military commentator, stated on Russian Channel One: “There are reports that 100,000 North Korean volunteers are prepared to come and take part in the conflict.” Korochenko cited North Korean experience in “anti-battery warfare” and continued: “If North Korea expresses a desire to meet its international duty to fight against Ukrainian fascism, we should let them.”<sup>1</sup> No North Korean source has commented on this topic. But the Ministry of Foreign Relations of the Russian Federation (RF) was forced to refute Korochenko’s claims, given its resonance in the press and social media around the world. In a briefing on August 11, the deputy director of that Ministry’s Information Department, Ivan Nachaev, stated that the announcement about the DPRK’s proposal to send 100,000 volunteers to participate in military operations in Ukraine in support of Russia was “fake from beginning to end.” Nachaev went on to say: “Such negotiations are not being conducted and the dispatch of North Korean volunteers to the DPR (Donetsk People’s Republic) and LPR (Lugansk People’s Republic) is not planned.” Moscow was convinced that the allied forces of Russia, DPR and LPR were “entirely sufficient for the successful completion of the task of the military special operation in Ukraine.”<sup>2</sup>

The fact that the prospect for North Korean volunteers was raised, albeit falsely, reveals a Russian problem with manpower for the war effort in Ukraine, still defined as a “special military operation.” Russia has lost many soldiers in Ukraine; according to some estimates, between 24 February and the end of July 2022, in the range of 75-100,000 Russian troops were killed or wounded in the war.<sup>3</sup> The Russian offensive in the Donbas

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<sup>1</sup> Cited in the *New York Post*, “Russian state TV: North Korea offering Kremlin 100,000 ‘volunteers,’” 5 August 2022, <https://nypost.com/2022/08/05/russian-state-tv-north-korea-offers-kremlin-100000-troops/>.

<sup>2</sup> RBC.Ru, “MID nazval fejkam soobshthenia o dobrobol’tsah iz KNDR na Ukraine” [Ministry of Foreign Affairs called the announcement about DPRK’s volunteers in Ukraine fake], 11 August 2022. <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/11/08/2022/62f4c21f9a7947b5621265e6>.

<sup>3</sup> On 20 July 2022, CIA Director William Burns told the Aspen Security Forum that around 15,000 Russian soldiers had been killed and three times that number wounded.

*Washington Post*, 9 August 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2022/08/09/russia-has-lost-up-80000-troops-ukraine-or-75000-or-is-it-60000/>.

is stalled and its occupation of territories in southern Ukraine is facing pressure from the Ukrainian army, which staged stunning counteroffensives in the Kharkiv area in September.<sup>4</sup> In October and November, the Ukrainian forces pushed back the Russians in the south too, culminating with a Russian retreat from Kherson (the only district center in Ukraine that had been occupied by Russian forces) and the left (northern) bank of Dnipro River in November.

North Korea firmly supports Russia in the United Nations and the North Korean army is known for its large size—the fourth largest in the world—and discipline.<sup>5</sup> The Russian Federation is isolated diplomatically and needs allies. China has tactically distanced itself from Russia’s “special military operation” in Ukraine despite Beijing’s pro-Russian propaganda. The Russo-Chinese friendship with “no limits,” declared by Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping in Beijing three weeks before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, is under stress. North Korea is also isolated and shares with Russia an anti-imperialist (i.e., anti-USA and NATO) rhetoric. The DPRK and Russia find themselves in a similar predicament and thus have common interests and enemies.

Within the constraints of the regular army and some auxiliary private forces like the “Wagner Group,” the Kremlin faced mounting difficulties in its campaign in Ukraine. While any support from friends would be timely, there is an inherent contradiction between the stated Russian goal of a “special military operation” and reliance, albeit unrealistic, on outside forces to achieve the Kremlin’s dubious military objectives. The earlier failed campaign to recruit Syrian volunteers is telling. The claim by the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) that 40,000 Syrian volunteers were enlisted to

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On September 9, Mikhail Khodorkovsky, a Russian opposition figure based in London, insisted that the number of killed Russian troops was close to 50,000, based on a document from the Ministry of Finance of RF, which paid compensations to the families of the deceased. Mikhail Khodorkovsky, Twitter, September 2022.

[https://twitter.com/mbk\\_center/status/1568174194243915776](https://twitter.com/mbk_center/status/1568174194243915776).

<sup>4</sup> Historian Stephen Kotkin noted that the original Ukrainian plan was to launch a counteroffensive in the south, but the plan changed in consultations with allies and they decided to strike in the north. The Russian lines in the Kharkiv region were weakest (Russia had already decided to retreat from the region), while in the south—Kherson region—Russia had the best troops and the heaviest weapons were dug in. Still Ukrainian army’ reclaiming occupied territory in the north was impressive feat and “huge information war victory.”

Stephen Kotkin, “European National Security: Past, Present, Future,” Lecture at Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies, Stanford University, 14 October 2022.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y0u\\_gswdnvw&ab\\_channel=GEONOW](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y0u_gswdnvw&ab_channel=GEONOW).

<sup>5</sup> The North Korean army has 1.2 million servicemen on active duty.

CFR.org Editors, “North Korea’s Military Capabilities,” *Council of Foreign Relations (CFR)*, 22 June 2022.

<https://www.cfr.org/background/north-korea-nuclear-weapons-missile-tests-military-capabilities>.

fight in Ukraine has not been confirmed by independent sources. The recruitment campaign in Syria, one of Russia's few allies in the UN, was a result of Putin's call for foreign fighters to join the war against "new Nazism," which in turn was a response to President Volodymyr Zelensky's appeal for foreign volunteers to enlist for the defence of Ukraine through the formation of an International Legion.<sup>6</sup> But this was largely a propaganda campaign to secure international support for Russia, rather than a practical goal.

There is no treaty between the Russian Federation (RF) and the DPRK to facilitate the dispatch of North Korean soldiers to fight at Russia's behest. In July 1961, the Soviet Union and North Korea signed the Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance, which stipulated military assistance for the other side in case of attack by a third country. The treaty was terminated after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and no treaty has been signed between the successor of the USSR—the Russian Federation—and the DPRK.<sup>7</sup> (There is such a treaty though between China and North Korea, signed in July 1961, which was renewed for another 20 years in 2021.) Moreover, the Russian Federation was not attacked but is the aggressor against Ukraine. Jagannath Panda argues that it would not be surprising if Moscow and Pyongyang decided suddenly to sign a new Friendship Treaty, given North Korea's resolute support of Russia in the UN Security Council and its recognition of the separatist DPR and LPR.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, North Korea While the RF and the DPRK have moved closer to each other strategically, signing such a treaty would lead to the reinstatement of the Cold War alliance system of the DPRK, which is a long shot, particularly during the war in Ukraine. It will be quite unusual and unlikely for the DPRK to sign a treaty with Russia, something not even Beijing has with Moscow. Moreover, at the height of the Cold War in Europe, when the DPRK had an alliance treaty with the Soviet Union, it did not (and was not expected as not a signatory of the Warsaw Pact) to participate in the Soviet intervention in Czechoslovakia to put down the Prague Spring in 1968. North Korea was not expected to participate in Soviet-led operations in Europe, as it was not a Warsaw Pact member.

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<sup>6</sup> Pierre Bousset, "Syrian Mercenaries in Ukraine: Delusion or Reality?" Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 22 June 2022. <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/87382>.

<sup>7</sup> See Avram Agov "North Korea in the Socialist World: Integration and Divergence, 1945–1970," PhD Diss., Vancouver: University of British Columbia, 2010.

<sup>8</sup> Jagannath Panda, "Will Pyongyang's NATO Tirades Pay Dividends?" *38 North*, 19 August 2022. <https://www.38north.org/2022/08/will-pyongyangs-nato-tirades-pay-dividends/>.

Similarly, it did not take part in the Soviet-Afghan war (1979–1989) either, albeit that was geographically closer.

Comparing North Korean armed forces' involvement abroad and South Korean international engagement during the Cold War era is instructive for better understanding the track record of the Korean People's Army (KPA). There was a Korean army involved abroad, and that was the Republic of Korea Army (ROKA). The South Korean army has more international experience than the KPA, most notably its deployment of some 350,000 troops to South Vietnam between 1964 and 1973. However, the ROKA's participation in Vietnam was part of a larger package of vital American economic and military aid to South Korea under the Brown Memorandum.<sup>9</sup> Further, from the start of the American occupation of South Korea in 1945, the South Korean army had been built and trained to operate with American forces. After the Korean War, South Korean forces were subordinated to a joint US-South Korean command, and since 1978 they have been subordinated to a ROK/US Combined Forces Command (CFC) during wartime, while ROKA is in independent command in peacetime. No such cohesion and coordination ever existed between the Soviet/Russian military and the North Korean army. The DPRK has been more fiercely independent (and nationalistic) compared to the ROK, as no foreign troops have been stationed in North Korea since 1958, when the Chinese forces, which participated in the Korean War, completed their withdrawal from the country. Also, South Korea's involvement in joint US-ROK combat operations in another country has not been replicated in the post-Cold War world.

The North Korean leadership must also consider the fallout from participating in war, which could harshen sanctions and increase its isolation. The DPRK would rather support Russia diplomatically and with propaganda and not commit troops, just like China is navigating between its friendship with Russia and refraining from direct economic and military aid for the war in Ukraine. Furthermore, a considerable portion of the KPA is used as a labour force in North Korea, and the mobilization of a large number of its troops abroad would deprive the economy of an important asset. Another risk facing the North Korean leadership should they dispatch troops abroad is the possible fallout from setbacks on the battlefield. The Russian army suffered defeats despite the

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<sup>9</sup> See Bruce Cumings, *Korea's Place in the Sun: A Modern History* (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2005).

occupation of about 15 percent of Ukrainian territory, and these setbacks demoralized the army and created considerable problems with troop morale and discipline. An additional risk for North Korean troops in Ukraine would be the lack of motivation and even possible desertion, something the Russian army is now facing.

The North Korean defence doctrine is based on the premise of containing US/South Korean forces on the Korean Peninsula. There is no strategic, political, or ideological justification for sending North Korean troops 7,000 km away from the homeland to fight for an unclear cause and jeopardize the security of their own country. Military analyst Chun In-bum doubts the effectiveness of possible joint Russian-North Korean warfare, given the KPA's lack of *inter-operable* capabilities in tactical, technical, and systemic terms for joint operations with another army. The Russian army has an enormous number of artillery pieces and the North Korean army can offer no technological value-added to Russia's current operations in Ukraine. The KPA has not even conducted drills with Russian army units. The North Korean army lacks combat experience in deployments abroad in the 21st century. During the Cold War, the North Korean military had limited involvement abroad, only sending a few air force units to Vietnam in the 1960s and some military advisors to African countries.<sup>10</sup>

In terms of weaponry and tactics, the DPRK has developed mobile, long-range multiple rocket systems, such as the K9 300mm Multiple Launch Rocket System (MLRS) with a range of 200 km, which outrange the US-made High Mobility Artillery Rocket System (HIMARS) supplied to Ukraine. But even this system would have limited application in the battlefields of Ukraine, where the Russians are disadvantaged in their live targeting system compared to the Ukrainians, who can rely on US commercial satellites for "virtually live coverage of the entire battlefield."<sup>11</sup> Also, the North Korean MLRS is expected to have less accuracy than Russian systems (considered to have an accuracy of 150-300 m from the target), which further undermines the value of their deployment. In addition to the range, HIMARS' advantage is mainly accuracy (1.5 m. deviation from target), and North Korean systems could not contribute to Russian artillery capabilities in this respect.<sup>12</sup> The practicality of deploying North Korean army

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<sup>10</sup> Andrew Salmon, "North Korea coming to Russia's rescue in Ukraine?" *Asia Times*, 8 August 2022. <https://asiatimes.com/2022/08/north-korea-coming-to-russias-rescue-in-ukraine/>.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Interview with Tihomir Bezlov, an analyst at the Center for the Study of Democracy in Sofia, 30 September 2022.



units to Ukraine is highly dubious, given the KPA's history, training, capabilities, technology, and lack of international experience.

However, RF-DPRK relations have warmed further recently. Vladimir Putin sent a congratulatory letter to Kim Jong Un on the occasion of North Korea's national holiday — liberation from Japan on 15 August 1945 (also celebrated in South Korea). The Russian leader stressed the “tradition of friendship” in the relationship between the two states.<sup>13</sup> In his response, Kim Jong Un referred to the roots of their friendship in the common struggle against Japan during World War II and how they now deal with military threats from “hostile forces” (*chöktae seryökdül*). The “strategic and tactical cooperation” (*chönnyak chönsul chökhyöp*) between the two countries has reached a new level, according to Kim.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, Putin congratulated Kim Jong Un on the founding day of the DPRK — 9 September stressing that Russia-North Korea relations were traditionally *friendly and benevolent* (*ch'insönchökigo söllinchökin*).<sup>15</sup> The exchange of letters between the two leaders can be categorized as a polite exchange, but in the current context, it is an indication of the common interests shared by the RF and the DPRK. North Korea needs Russian support to limit its isolation, and Russia faces difficulties in finding countries firmly on its side. Yet a closer relationship does not equate to a treaty of alliance.

Lastly, although the Russian army is already huge (with 1,013,628 enlisted soldiers on paper), on 25 August, President Putin signed a decree to expand the army by 137,000 soldiers by early 2023.<sup>16</sup> This expansion is an attempt to compensate for Russian losses in Ukraine and to avoid military mobilization. But this proved insufficient, as there were problems recruiting soldiers. Moreover, after the defeat of Russian units by Ukrainian forces in the Kharkiv region, on 21 September, Vladimir Putin made a desperate decision for “partial mobilization.”<sup>17</sup> This escalation showed the dire situation of the Russian army in Ukraine and the acute need for manpower. Article 7 of the order was classified and conspicuously missing in the public announcement, raising speculations that the number

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<sup>13</sup> TV Zvezda, 15 August 2022. <https://tvzvezda.ru/news/2022815454-hJDgJ.html>.

<sup>14</sup> KCNA, 15 August 2022. <http://www.kcna.kp/kp/article/q/919e17c7547c356b51df0e4221a65bbc.kcmsf>.

<sup>15</sup> KCNA, 9 September 2022.

<http://www.kcna.kp/kp/article/q/134a0eb1839cb01381c703e991441821dc30cfba1f041956b655c66f99c94c97.kcmsf>

<sup>16</sup> RIA Novosti, 25 August 2022. <https://ria.ru/20220825/ukaz-1812094355.html>.

<sup>17</sup> President of Russia, Decree “For Announcing Partial Mobilization in the Russian Federation,” 21 September 2022. <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/69391>.

of mobilized could reach 1 million reservists.<sup>18</sup> In an interview, the Russian Defense Minister, Sergei Shoigu, stated that 300,000 personnel would be mobilized, which is 1.1 percent of the mobilization capacity of the RF.<sup>19</sup> The mobilization would be carried out in several stages. On 14 October, the Russian president claimed that 222,000 troops were already mobilized and the draft would be completed in two weeks by reaching the target of 300,000. Putin also remarked that 16,000 newly drafted soldiers were already deployed for “combat tasks.”<sup>20</sup> On 28 October Sergei Shoigu reported to Putin in the Kremlin that the partial mobilization was completed; 82,000 personnel were already deployed in combat zones and 41,000 of them were in military units (the rest had supporting roles). The other mobilized personnel (218,000) were being trained in Russian military bases.<sup>21</sup> And on 4 November, Putin announced that a total of 318,000 “volunteers” were drafted, 49,000 of whom were dispatched for “combat tasks.”<sup>22</sup>

Even before the mobilization was completed, reports surfaced about ongoing Russian efforts to recruit former Afghan commandos, scattered after the American withdrawal and Taliban’s take-over of Kabul, as part of the foreign legion in the war in Ukraine. The Russian mercenary organization, Wagner Group, was likely behind this campaign.<sup>23</sup> It is unclear how many Afghans could be recruited in a Russian foreign legion, but their effect on the war effort remains doubtful. The Wagner Group, headed by Yevgeny Prigozhin, known as “Putin’s Chef,” is also believed to have recruited prisoners to buttress Wanger Group’s forces in Ukraine.<sup>24</sup> All these mobilization and recruitment campaigns revealed growing Russian frustration with the development of the war.

Retired General Jack Keane, director of the Institute for the Study of War (ISW), reckoned that the mobilization aimed at increasing the Russian armed forces in Ukraine

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<sup>18</sup> “Kremlin source: hidden article in Putin’s mobilization order allows Russia to draft one million people,” *Novaya Gazeta. Europe*, 22 September 2022.

<sup>19</sup> Interfax.ru, “The minister of defense of the RF announced mobilization of 300,000 reservists,” 21 September 2022. <https://www.interfax.ru/russia/863188>.

<sup>20</sup> Cited in Interfax, 14 October 2022. <https://www.interfax.ru/russia/867910>.

<sup>21</sup> Russian President’s Office, “Meeting with the Minister of Defense Sergei Shoigu,” 28 October 2022. <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/69703>.

<sup>22</sup> RIA Novosti, 4 November 2022. <https://ria.ru/20221104/putin-1829216139.html>.

<sup>23</sup> Lynne O’Donnell, “Russia’s Recruiting Afghan Commandos,” *Foreign Policy*, 25 October 2022. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/10/25/afghanistan-russia-ukraine-military-recruitment-putin-taliban/>.

<sup>24</sup> BBC, “Russia’s Wagner boss: It’s prisoners fighting in Ukraine, or your children,” 16 September 2022. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-62922152>.



to 400-500,000 soldiers (more than doubled the original deployment of about 200,000 troops).<sup>25</sup> The question remains of how the “partial mobilization” would affect the war on the ground, given the logistical and equipment constraints of the Russian army. But it will certainly lessen the chances of soliciting the services of foreign soldiers, including North Koreans. According to the analysis of the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), Russia’s failure to choose one reserve system after the end of the Cold War will undermine the efficacy of mobilized forces, and RUSI makes a grim prognosis of unprepared mobilized forces being rushed to the front.<sup>26</sup> The Russian mobilization is facing various problems: draft dodgers fleeing the country, protests, inconstancy of draft rules, logistical problems, etc. The fact that Putin delayed it for so long shows that it was a last resort, and how helpful soldiers from North Korea might have been for the beleaguered Russian war campaign.

*North Korean construction workers in Donbas: difficult but not impossible*

In an interview for *Izvestia* (18 July), the Russian ambassador in Pyongyang, Alexander Matsegora, stated that North Korean construction workers were “highly qualified, hard-working, and ready to work in the most difficult conditions.” And they could “help in restoring the social infrastructure and industrial facilities destroyed by the retreating Nazi-Ukrainians (*ukronatsistami*)” in Donbas.<sup>27</sup> Again, like the report for North Korean troops, there is no North Korean statement or source and this can be interpreted as Matsegora’s attempt to score diplomatic points in front of his bosses in Moscow. But there was a follow-up on the report at a higher Russian government level. On 19 August Marat Khusnullin, Deputy Prime Minister of the RF, remarked in Kazan that North Korean construction companies offered their services to Russia and if “they want to come, we will welcome them.” Khusnullin has been in charge of the construction and regional development in the RF since 2020 and he supervises the reconstruction of Donbas. According to him, currently, 26,000 workers were employed in the “liberated territories”

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<sup>25</sup> Fox News, 13 October 2022.

<sup>26</sup> Sam Cranny-Evans, “Understanding Russia’s Mobilisation,” RUSI, 28 September 2022. <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/understanding-russias-mobilisation>.

<sup>27</sup> *Izvestia*, 18 July 2022. <https://iz.ru/1365120/nataliia-portiakova/severokoreitsy-ne-vystavliaiut-nam-scheta-posle-kazhdogo-golosovaniia-v-oon>.

(of Donbas) but more were needed.<sup>28</sup> Khusnullin's comments indicate Russian-North Korean discussions on this topic of North Korean workers.

It is possible that North Korea could dispatch workers to Donbas. First, both sides are in need: the Russians for manpower for the reconstruction of Russian-occupied regions in Eastern Ukraine (from Moscow's perspective, the Donbas will become part of the Russian Federation), while labour could be a valuable source of foreign currency for North Korea. Besides, before the new tougher UNSC sanctions, North Koreans worked in Russia's Far Eastern region; joint projects in the timber industry go back to the period of Soviet-DPRK economic cooperation. In recent decades, North Korean labourers have worked in China, Southeast Asia, and Africa. The DPRK has plenty of experience in dispatching workers abroad as a way of obtaining valuable foreign currency. More recently, North Korean workers were employed in Russia and even Eastern Europe.

The recent history of Russia-North Korea diplomatic and economic relations provides at least a theoretical foundation for future joint economic projects. In 2014, Russia and North Korea settled the DPRK's historical debt to the former USSR (which was in the vicinity of USD 10 billion), leaving an outstanding amount of about USD 1 billion. The sum was assigned to Vneshtorgbanka (Bank for Foreign Trade), and in the following 20 years, it was to be transferred systematically into an account for virtual funds for joint economic projects.<sup>29</sup> In other words, the remaining debt would be the North Korean share of funding future projects between the two neighbours. In a speech at the banquet during the summit in Vladivostok, Kim Jong Un remarked that the two countries and peoples were connected by feelings of "comrades-in-arms" (*chõnuõi chõngũro*) in the anti-Japanese struggle, acknowledging the role of the Soviet Red Army in the liberation of Korea in 1945 and the Russian sacrifices (something North Korean historiography tended to ignore). Kim also noted that the DPRK had a strategic policy to further improve relations with Russia.<sup>30</sup> Putin and Kim also discussed economic projects, such as a railway connection linking the two Koreas and the Russian Trans-Siberian railway, a gas pipeline to the Korean Peninsula, and the construction of power lines.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>28</sup> RIA Novosti, 19 August 2022. <https://realty.ria.ru/20220819/kndr-1810711583.html>.

<sup>29</sup> *Izvestia*, 25 April 2019. <https://iz.ru/872267/nataliia-portiakova-dmitrii-laru/kim-nash-kak-proshel-pervyi-vizit-glavy-kndr-v-rossiiu>. Accessed 24 November 2019.

<sup>30</sup> *Rodong sinmun*, 26 April 2019. [http://www.rodong.rep.kp/ko/index.php?strPageID=SF01\\_02\\_01&newsID=2019-04-26-0003](http://www.rodong.rep.kp/ko/index.php?strPageID=SF01_02_01&newsID=2019-04-26-0003), Accessed 17 June 2019.

<sup>31</sup> RIA Novosti, 25 April 2019. <https://ria.ru/20190425/1553038175.html>. Accessed 11 November 2019.

But Russia subscribed to the international sanctions levelled against the DPRK in 2018, and none of these ideas for joint projects have been realized.

The DPRK recognized the Donetsk People's Republic on 13 July 2022, and DPR leader Denis Pushilin expressed his gratitude, writing in his *Telegram* account: "This political decision will become the basis for further development of relations in the economic sphere. Bilateral partnership [with North Korea] will increase the geography of trade for the enterprises of our states."<sup>32</sup> North Korea's recognition of the DPR can be seen largely as a diplomatic gesture of support for Russia, rather than as a plan for formal economic cooperation with the Donetsk region. Even if there is some form of economic exchange it will be done through and with the help of Russia. Furthermore, sending North Korean workers to Donbas would violate UNSC sanctions and thus would need to be planned and undertaken as a clandestine operation of very limited scope and with risks involved. Sending North Korean workers to Donbas would be a repetition of what the DPRK and the Soviet Union/Russian Federation did in their economic exchanges.

On 17 August, Pushilin followed Putin's example and sent a letter to Kim Jong Un to congratulate the DPRK on its national holiday. He wrote that the people of Donbas were fighting to return historical *freedom and justice*, for which the Korean people had fought over the last 77 years. The DPR's leader was convinced that the two countries would have *mutually beneficial cooperation*. The message was a formal courtesy, yet by it Pushilin was also trying to legitimize his self-proclaimed republic by engaging in international diplomacy, with North Korea being one of the few states (along with Syria) that recognized the DPR. The communication was also an attempt to lay the groundwork for employing North Korean workers. This may happen in the longer run through Moscow's mediation, but only on the condition the Donbas is still under Russian/DPR control, likely in those regions that were Russia-dominated before the war.

### **Friends in need: restocking the Russian army**

While it is improbable that North Korea will commit troops to the Russian occupation of Ukraine, Russia could purchase munitions from the DPRK. As the Russian army relies heavily on its artillery superiority in its war with Ukraine, its forces are

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<sup>32</sup> Denis Pushilin, Telegram, 13 July 2022. <https://t.me/pushilindenis/2445>.

quickly depleting its reserves from the Soviet era and its munitions stocks will require quick replenishing. In fact, there are already reports of Russian purchases of artillery shells and other munitions from North Korea. According to U.S. intelligence in early September, Russia was planning to buy millions of rockets and artillery shells from North Korea.<sup>33</sup> And a report by the Czech intelligence even claimed that Russia was already purchasing munitions from the DPRK.<sup>34</sup> On 21 September, the North Korean government categorically rejected this claim. The vice director general of the General Bureau of Equipment of DPRK's Ministry of National Defense stated: "We have never exported weapons or ammunition to Russia in the past, and we have no plans to do so in the future."<sup>35</sup> But North Korea would never acknowledge the export of weapons or munitions to a foreign country, given the UNSC sanctions resolution banning DPRK from exporting arms.

The North Korean military has compatible artillery and munitions with the Russian army. It is unlikely that rockets (even old ones) would be part of such transactions but North Korea may be able to offer artillery shells, including 107 mm Katyusha rockets, 122 mm rocket launchers, and munitions for small arms like machine guns or automatic rifles from its massive stockpiles.<sup>36</sup> It is likely that the Russian self-propelled 122 mm MLRS (BM-21, known as "Grad") is compatible with the North Korean systems. But missiles would be the most needed article for the Russian army. That is why the Russians deploy so aggressively the Iranian drone Shahed 136 as a substitute for missiles. North Korean supply of 152 mm shells (Soviet standard) could also help replenish Russia's shrinking stockpile. Given the heavy use of long-range artillery in the war, such procurement would be invaluable for the Russian army. The Russian artillery

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<sup>33</sup> AP, Aamer Madhani, "US: Russia to buy rockets, artillery shells from North Korea," 6 September 2022. <https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-north-korea-government-and-politics-495e976d1217d38c397a16e79cc305de>.

<sup>34</sup> Cited in Milan Vodička, "Analyza: Komu dojdou ve válce zbraně dřív. Rusku, nebo NATO?" [Analysis: Who will run out of weapons first in a war? Russia or NATO?], iDnes.cz, 7 September 2022. [https://www.idnes.cz/zpravy/zahranicni/valka-ukrajina-rusko-nato-nedostatek-malo-munice-zbrane.A220906\\_165001\\_zahranicni\\_kadl](https://www.idnes.cz/zpravy/zahranicni/valka-ukrajina-rusko-nato-nedostatek-malo-munice-zbrane.A220906_165001_zahranicni_kadl).

<sup>35</sup> KCNA, 21 September 2022.

<http://www.kcna.kp/kp/article/q/59b4eb9b3cc6925359ade3537d043ec86b7e9e72c042fed50ed934901264a931.kcmsf>.

<sup>36</sup> Bruce Bechtol, cited in Josh Smith, "Explainer: What weapons could North Korea send to Russia?" Reuters, 7 September 2022. <https://www.reuters.com/world/what-weapons-could-north-korea-send-russia-2022-09-07/>.

is already facing a shortage of 122 mm shells as well. Hence, North Korea could sell 122 mm and 152 mm artillery shells to Russia.<sup>37</sup>

The advance of the Russian army in the Donbas relied on manpower advantage (in Severodonetsk, for example, the Russian troops outnumbered Ukrainian ones by 7:1) and intensive use of artillery.<sup>38</sup> Volodimir Datsenko, a Ukrainian military analyst, estimates that the Russian artillery advantage over Ukrainian forces is 5:1, and in MLRS the Russian advantage is 7:1.<sup>39</sup> According to various assessments, the Russian army's artillery munitions will last until March-July 2023 if they continue to use artillery pieces at the current rate.<sup>40</sup> However, these estimates usually do not take into account the loss of munitions as a result of the destruction of Russian munition depots by the Ukrainian army. And old defective shells could also decrease the number of useful munitions on both sides. Hence, the Russian purchase of artillery from the DPRK cannot be ruled out. Russian artillery pieces are becoming worn out. It is accepted that an artillery barrel can fire between 2,000 and 6,000 shells before it is worn out (though it also depends on the intensity of the firing, quality of maintenance, etc.). After the sanctions imposed on Russia in 2014, the Russian military-industrial complex may not possess the capacity to build machinery for the production of artillery pieces, or at least they have a limited machine-building capacity.<sup>41</sup> This could further hinder the production of artillery, which in turn might force Russia to restock its artillery through outside procurement.

On 30 September Putin signed an agreement for the “entrance” (*vkhozhdenii*) of four regions in southern and eastern Ukrainian—Kherson, Zaporizhzhia, Luhansk (LPR),

<sup>37</sup> Interview with Tihomir Bezlov, 30 September 2022. Also, Jack Watling, cited in Ifang Bremer, “North Korea able to supply vast quantities of ammunition to Russia: Experts,” *NK News*, 6 September 2022.

<https://www.nknews.org/2022/09/north-korea-capable-of-supplying-vast-quantities-of-ammunition-to-russia-expert/>.

<sup>38</sup> Jack Watling, “Time is the Hidden Flank in Assessing Russia’s Mobilisation,” *RUSI*, 23 September 2022.

<https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/time-hidden-flank-assessing-russias-mobilisation>.

<sup>39</sup> Volodimir Datsenko, “Russia has five times more artillery systems [than Ukraine], but Ukraine now has MLRS capable of hitting in the rear,” *Forbes Ukraine*, 11 July 2022. <https://forbes.ua/ru/inside/u-rosii-v-pyat-raziv-bilshe-artilerii-ale-v-ukraini-teper-e-mlrs-zdatni-bit-v-til-yak-vazhka-zbroya-nato-mozhe-zminiti-viynu-11072022-7098>.

<sup>40</sup> According to in August, in case Russian artillery fires 1.5 million per month (the current rate, according to Volodimir Datsenko), it will have munitions for 11 months or until July 2023. Postkriptum, “Local war,” 23 August 2022. <https://postskriptum.org/2022/08/23/local/2/>.

Other sources point to March 2023 for the exhaustion of the Russian shell stockpile. YouTube, “How Many Artillery Shells Does Russia Have Left?” 9 July 2022.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QcUcp0oHTuo&ab\\_channel=CovertCabal](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QcUcp0oHTuo&ab_channel=CovertCabal).

<sup>41</sup> Interview with Tihomir Bezlov, 30 September 2022.

and Donetsk (DPR)—into the RF.<sup>42</sup> The annexation was preceded by “fake referendums” in the Russian-occupied regions. In his belligerent speech at the ceremony at the Kremlin (September 30), Putin pledged to “protect” the newly annexed lands “with all the forces and means at our disposal.”<sup>43</sup> The annexation was prompted by the desperate need for Putin to score a political victory at home, and his nuclear blackmail underlines the difficult situation of the Russian forces in Ukraine. It should be noted that North Korea was the first state to recognize the annexation. On 4 October the Foreign Ministry of DPRK issued a statement through Jo Chol Su, director general of the Department of International Organizations, insisting that the referendums in the occupied territories were held in accordance with the UN Charter specifying “the principles of the equality of peoples and their right to self-determination.” Jo Chol Su also criticized the US for maintaining a “unipolar world” (*ilgŭk segye*) and for interfering in the internal affairs of independent countries.<sup>44</sup> On 12 October, the DPRK was one of the four countries in addition to the RF (Belarus, Syria, and Nicaragua), which voted against the UN General Assembly’s resolution condemning the Russian annexation.<sup>45</sup> North Korea would continue its unwavering diplomatic support to Russia. And Moscow’s latest actions signalled a further dangerous escalation of the war at a time when the Russian army was on the battlefield defensive. This means that it will need more munitions for that “king of the battlefield” — the artillery.

The most difficult part of possible Russian procurement of munitions will be securing rockets. Importantly, on 6 October, Volodimir Datsenko reported that in fact, Russian defence ministry tried to purchase rockets from China and North Korea, but the negotiations with the two states failed.<sup>46</sup> If this report is accurate, it reveals the urgency for the Russian military to replenish its stockpile as well as the caution of China and North Korea not to be seen as facilitators of the Russian military campaign in Ukraine. It

<sup>42</sup> *Izvestia*, September 30, 2022. <https://iz.ru/1403523/izvestiia/liudi-svoi-vybor-sdelali>.

<sup>43</sup> *The Guardian*, “Putin annexes four regions of Ukraine in a major escalation of Russia’s war,” 30 September 2022. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/sep/30/putin-russia-war-annexes-ukraine-regions>.

<sup>44</sup> KCNA, 4 October 2022.

<http://www.kcna.kp/kp/article/q/134a0eb1839cb01381c703e991441821c0e25c62ca10d12159642f6a0354c9df.kcms>.

<sup>45</sup> BBC, “Ukraine war: UN General Assembly condemns Russia annexation,” 12 October 2022.

<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-63237669>.

<sup>46</sup> Volodimir Datsenko, “The Iranian drones -kamikaze could be more dangerous than expensive precision rockets,” *Forbes Ukraine*, 6 October 2022. <https://forbes.ua/ru/war-in-ukraine/iranski-droni-kamikadze-mozhut-buti-nebezpechnishimi-za-dorogi-raketi-voni-deshevi-ta-letyat-daleko-chi-mozhut-voni-zminiti-khid-viyni-06102022-8833>.



also shows that the DPRK would follow China's lead in formulating its policy toward the war.

Yet, the Russian purchase of artillery munitions from North Korea remains a realistic possibility. In fact, there was another American report (2 November ) indicating that North Korea was already selling a "significant number" of artillery shells to Russia via third countries in the Middle East and North Africa. The US administration's national security spokesman, John Kirby, stated that "the DPRK is covertly supplying and we're going to monitor to see whether shipments are received."<sup>47</sup> As expected, North Korea refuted the US report. On November 8, DPRK's Ministry of National Defense issued a statement, accusing the US of spreading a groundless "rumour of arms dealings" between North Korea and Russia, calling it a "conspiracy theory" (*mur'yaksöl*). The Ministry reiterated that that the DPRK has never had arms dealings with Russia and it had "no plan to do so in the future."<sup>48</sup> The DPRK continued its efforts to disassociate itself from the Russian war effort in Ukraine, even though the reports of North Korean sales of ammunition to Russia were piling up. What is more, Russia looked for a supply of clothes from North Korea, which indicated the dire state of the Russian market deprived of the import of European goods. In 2017, Russian state import companies terminated imports of goods and labour from the DPRK, based on the UN sanctions to which RF subscribed. But now Russia was looking for ways to import consumer goods, including clothes, from North Korea. A Russian diplomat at the RF's embassy in Pyongyang made a reference to the 1980s when the USSR imported goods from North Korea's light industry sector worth 300 million rubles (over 300 million USD) on an annual basis. One possibility was the "parallel import" (without the agreement by the manufacturer or proprietor of goods) channel, which is actually legalized smuggling, which supplied 16 billion USD worth of goods in Russia in 2022.<sup>49</sup> Hence, in addition to procurement of munitions, Russia and North Korea were posed to reactivate old trade ties.

Interestingly, South Korea was actively engaged in the armament of Poland, which emerged as one of the main donors of weapons and munitions from its old stockpiles to

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<sup>47</sup> *The New York Times*, "North Korea secretly shipped munitions to Russia through the Middle East and North Africa, the U.S. says," 2 November 2022. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/11/02/world/europe/russia-ukraine-north-korea-ammunition.html>.

<sup>48</sup> KCNA, 8 November 2022. <http://www.kcna.kp/kp/article/q/655a3c30289d0b5e7228f799f83e0bd9.kcmsf>.

<sup>49</sup> *The Moscow Times*, 4 November 2022. <https://www.moscowtimes.ru/2022/11/04/rossiya-poprosila-odezhdu-v-severnoi-koree-a26058>.

Ukraine after the start of the war. In 2022, the South Korean defence industry contracted over 21 trillion won (14.7 billion USD) worth of defence systems and weapons to Poland. The value of the contracts doubled the total of South Korea's defence exports in 2021. Based on the agreements, Poland would receive 48 units of supersonic advanced jet trainers and light combat aircraft FA-50 (KAI), 980 units of battle tank K2 648 units of self-propelled howitzer K9 and 288 units of rocket artillery system K239.<sup>50</sup> In that sense, South Korea got involved, albeit indirectly, in the East-European conflict. We cannot rule out that some of this massive supply of arms would find its way to battlefields in Ukraine. Even if South Korean arms are not provided to the Ukrainians, the Polish purchase of modern defence systems from South Korea would allow Warsaw to supply additional weapons to Ukraine from its existing reserves.

## Conclusion

Using North Korean *volunteers* to fight in Eastern Ukraine is a non-starter for various political, strategic, and military reasons. Even in the heyday of the USSR-DPRK alliance, North Korean troops were not deployed to fight in Soviet war zones. North Korea does not have the military capacity to be of assistance to Russia, as the Korean Peninsula is the only region the KPA is trained to operate.

Sending North Korean workers to the Donbas would constitute a contemporary relaunch of an old Russian program. It is one thing to employ North Korean workers in Siberia, but quite another to send them to a war zone in another country. North Korean leadership would be making a big gamble by sending its workers, despite the potential economic windfall. What's more, such an action would only further isolate Pyongyang and likely bring about additional sanctions. What North Korea would theoretically gain from helping Russia would be lost in the tightening economic squeeze of those countries supporting Ukraine in the war. Still, it is possible that a limited number of North Korean workers could be employed in those areas of the Donbas that were controlled by Russia

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<sup>50</sup> Kim Da Sol, "Why Poland is buying S. Korean jets, tanks, howitzers," *The Korea Herald*, 27 October 2022. <https://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20221027000556>.

prior to the invasion of 24 February 2022 and after the stabilization of the front line, so the reconstruction is conducted in areas which are not immediately endangered by warfare.

Yet, North Korea could sell munitions to the Russian army in exchange for energy supplies or cash. For Russia, the supply of munitions is more vital than securing labour, given the development of the war in Ukraine and the mounting materiel problems facing Russian forces. But a North Korean delivery of artillery shells to Russia is not without risks. First, there would be a considerable international backlash if North Korean munitions were discovered on the battlefield, and this is very likely to happen, as it did with the Iranian drones. With evidence of arms supplies to Russian forces in the Ukraine, the DPRK will likely face further international sanctions. Another risk is the uncertain Chinese reaction. While China is politically supportive of Russia, it has been careful to avoid implications in helping Moscow militarily. A North Korean shipment of munitions to Russia would put China in an awkward position vis-à-vis both Russia (that it does not help its friend) and the West, that the DPRK—arguably China’s closest ally— helps Russia militarily. The tensions on the Korean Peninsula have risen substantially in recent months due to the acceleration of ballistic missile tests by the DPRK. On top of these tensions in the region, North Korea practically would widen the war in Ukraine to East Asia by selling munitions to the RF. Thus, Beijing may try to contain its ally and stay clear of the war.