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PUTIN'S PARTNER

North Korea's cooperation with Russia
amid the war against Ukraine

Olena Guseinova

ANALYSIS

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Executive Summary

This report examines the strengthening partnership between Russia and North Korea amid Russia's ongoing war against Ukraine. Moscow, grappling with ammunition shortages, has turned to Pyongyang for military supplies and potentially even troops. Author Olena Guseinova from Hankuk of Foreign Studies University in Seoul estimates the value of the arms deal between the two countries at up to \$5.5 billion, viewing North Korea's military support as a critical, timely resource for Moscow. The report also analyzes possible troop deployments and concludes that up to 20,000 North Korean soldiers could be sent to Russia.

Beyond its immediate military needs, Russia seeks to leverage its relationship with North Korea—and the potential transfer of military technology—as a tool to weaken the unity of Western alliances, particularly in East Asia. By fostering security and diplomatic challenges for countries like South Korea and Japan, Russia aims to shift the geopolitical landscape in its favor.

However, Russia's strategy faces several limitations. North Korea's outdated and unreliable weaponry raises doubts about the sustainability of the arms deal, while Pyongyang's history of shifting alliances makes it an unpredictable partner. Additionally, by empowering a more aggressive North Korea, Russia risks straining its relationship with China. Moscow's deeper cooperation with a pariah state like North Korea, particularly through the transfer of sensitive technologies, could further isolate Russia on the global stage.

Despite these constraints, the EU and its partners should take steps to mitigate the risks and negative consequences of this growing cooperation. The report recommends bolstering support for like-minded nations in the Indo-Pacific, particularly South Korea and Japan, through enhanced security and economic partnerships to better equip them to withstand Russia's blackmail efforts.

Additionally, the EU should refine its sanctions strategy to more effectively target financial inflows to Russia, especially those funding military activities and arms deals with North Korea. This may include tighter monitoring of trade routes and financial transactions, as well as collaboration with international partners to close existing loopholes. The report also underscores the importance of engaging the Global South through diplomatic outreach and economic incentives, emphasizing the negative implications of the Russian-North Korean partnership for a rules-based order and global stability.

I. Introduction

The past two years have been marked by an unprecedented strengthening of ties between Russia and North Korea, arguably the most significant since the end of the Cold War. Over the course of 2023 and 2024, the two countries have engaged in more than thirty high-level exchanges, including two summits at the leadership level, revitalized their bilateral trade via sanction-evasive transactions involving the barter of UN-restricted items like oil and weapons, intensified military and technical cooperation in strategically sensitive domains such as aerospace and satellite management, and ultimately formalized their mutual defense commitments through the conclusion of a comprehensive strategic partnership.

The West has been watching these developments with concern for two primary reasons. First, the rapprochement between these two countries became instrumental in transforming Russia's failed illegal rapid offensive in Ukraine into a protracted war of attrition. The arms deal negotiated with Pyongyang enabled the Kremlin to swiftly adjust its military strategy and even gain a temporary advantage on the battlefield, as the volume of ammunition provided by North Korea to Russia initially significantly surpassed Western artillery supplies to Ukraine.¹ Although Kim Jong-un's support eventually proved insufficient to decisively alter the course of the war, the ongoing uncertainty surrounding the future scale and duration of this new partnership intensifies Europe's security challenges, particularly as the hostilities against Ukraine continue.

Second, the Kremlin seeks to leverage its closer ties with Pyongyang to weaken the unity and resolve of the Western alliance in its commitment to Kyiv. By threatening to counter military assistance to Ukraine with comparable support for North Korea, Russia aims to create a complex diplomatic environment in which Kyiv's partners in East Asia could be compelled to weigh the continuation of their military aid to Ukraine against the potential risks of escalating tensions on the Korean Peninsula.² The lack of transparency in the dealings between Moscow and Pyongyang is intended to work to the Kremlin's advantage, as the mere anticipation that Russia might contemplate transferring sensitive military technology to North Korea is expected to unsettle Washington's regional allies, particularly South Korea and Japan, in their efforts to support Kyiv. If successful, this tactic could drive wedges within the U.S. alliance network, allowing Moscow to exploit internal divisions and potentially shift the dynamics of the war in its favor.

Russia's strategy, however, is not without its limitations. While collaboration with Pyongyang may have delivered short-term gains, Moscow is likely to face considerable challenges in maintaining, expanding, and leveraging this partnership. First, North Korea's supply of weapons is constrained in both quantity and quality, casting doubt not only on Pyongyang's capacity to sustain long-term arms provisions but also on the Kremlin's willingness to continue importing such substandard weaponry. Second, North Korea has very few assets to offer Moscow aside from its large stockpiles of outdated ammunition. Once these supplies are exhausted, it remains unclear how bilateral relations would proceed, given that Kim Jong-un is unable to provide the economic or technological assistance that Russia might require to sustain its war effort in Ukraine. Third, North Korea is an erratic and unreliable companion, prone to engaging in unilateral actions that are often at odds with the broader interests of its partners. Aligning too closely with the Kim regime or entrusting it with sensitive technologies carries significant risks for Russia and may ultimately not be in its best interest. Thus, while these newly established ties between Moscow and Pyongyang pose a challenge for Ukraine and its allies, with careful management, they should not be strong enough to fracture the Ukraine's support network or change the course of the war.

This policy paper explores the recent developments in Russia-North Korea relations, aiming to assess the potential trajectory, durability, and impact of this alliance on regional and global security. The report is structured as follows: **Section II** provides an analysis of diplomatic and economic relations between Russia and North Korea from the end of the Cold War to the outbreak of the war in Ukraine in 2022. **Section III** examines the key developments in their relationship from 2023 to 2024. **Section IV** analyzes the complex nature of the Russia-North Korea relationship and the power dynamics within the alliance, particularly with regard to potential bargaining over the transfer of advanced technologies. **Section V** explores possible scenarios for the evolution of Russia-North Korea cooperation before and after the end of the war against Ukraine, and **Section VI** offers policy recommendations for the EU and Germany on how to manage and potentially weaken this evolving relationship.

1 Joshua Posaner et al. 2023. North Korea sends Putin tons of ammo. Europe can't do the same for Ukraine. POLITICO. November 2. <https://www.politico.eu/article/vladimir-putin-kim-jong-un-russia-pyongyang-beats-brussels-to-a-million-ammunition-rounds/>

2 Katya Krebs et al. 2024. Putin threatens to arm North Korea if the West continues to supply weapons to Ukraine. CNN. June 21. <https://edition.cnn.com/2024/06/20/asia/putin-ukraine-north-korea-south-korea-intl-hnk/index.html>

II. Overview of the Russia-DPRK Relationship Prior to the Full-Scale Invasion Against Ukraine

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the Kremlin anticipated the collapse of North Korea's regime and opted to distance itself from Pyongyang in favor of cultivating closer ties with the more economically prosperous Seoul. However, as contacts with North Korea all but ceased, Moscow's efforts to strengthen relations with South Korea failed to yield the anticipated outcomes, resulting in Russia's increasing marginalization from the geopolitical dynamics of the Korean Peninsula.³ Recognizing its strategic miscalculation, the Kremlin sought to repair its damaged relations with the Kim regime. These efforts culminated in Vladimir Putin's official visit to North Korea in 2000, followed by reciprocal trips by Kim Jong-il to Russia in 2001 and 2002.

These advances were significantly undermined by the uranium crisis in 2002, after which strategic diplomatic efforts were predominantly channeled through the Six-Party Talks. The North Korean nuclear test in 2006 further aggravated the relations, leading to a five-year pause in high-level meetings. The dialogue was resumed only in 2011, when Kim Jong-il paid its third and last visit to Russia. The most tangible outcome of the Kim-Medvedev summit in Ulan-Ude was writing off 90% of North Korea's debt inherited from the Soviet era.⁴

Hopes for the normalization of relations were once again disrupted by the sudden death of Kim Jong-il in 2011 and the subsequent ascension of his son, Kim Jong-un, who, upon assuming power, initiated a series of new missile and nuclear tests in 2012 and 2013. Condemning these actions, Moscow joined the UN Security Council's sanctions against North Korea. A year later, however, Russia sought to revive its ties with Pyongyang amid the deterioration of its own relations with the West following the illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014. Despite the surge in bilateral high-level exchanges throughout 2014,⁵ relations hit another dead end after North Korea successfully tested a hydrogen bomb in 2016 and launched an intercontinental ballistic missile, allegedly capable of striking the United States, in 2017.⁶ Following these events, under pressure from China and the United States, Russia had no choice but to support UN Security Council resolutions imposing tough economic sanctions on North Korea. These international restrictions effectively made any normal economic interaction with

Pyongyang impossible.

After talks with Washington regarding potential sanctions relief collapsed in 2018, North Korea sought to rekindle its relations with Moscow, aiming to explore alternative avenues for easing international restrictions. In 2019, Kim Jong-un made his first visit to Russia, during which he met with Vladimir Putin in Vladivostok. While no formal agreements were signed, the summit underscored North Korea's strategic intent to leverage its historical ties with Russia to counterbalance the pressure from the United States and its allies.

This improvement in relations was hindered by yet another event—the outbreak of COVID-19. When the pandemic struck in early 2020, the diplomatic and economic ties between North Korea and Russia effectively dropped to zero. The global health crisis prompted North Korea to implement stringent border closures. Consequently, any momentum from Kim Jong-un's 2019 visit to Russia quickly dissipated.

While diplomatic relations between Russia and North Korea saw periods of ups and downs, their economic cooperation consistently demonstrated a downward trend. For instance, if in 1990, the USSR accounted for 53.3% of North Korea's foreign trade, by 2000 this figure had dropped to 2%, and by 2022, it had further declined to less than 0.2% (See Graph 1)

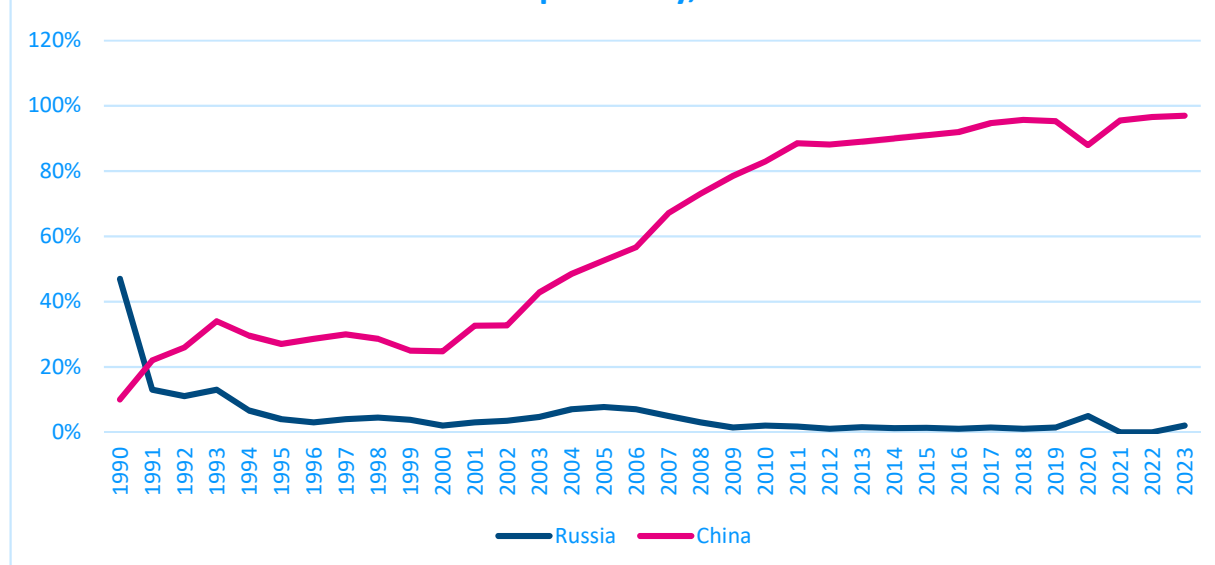
³ Rinna, Anthony V. 2024. Historic Parallel: Why Russia Is Likely to Abandon Its Korean Equidistance Strategy. *38 North*. July 9. <https://www.38north.org/2024/07/historic-parallel-why-russia-is-likely-to-abandon-its-korean-equidistance-strategy/>

⁴ Dyakina, Maya and Lidia Kelly. 2012. Russia writes off 90 percent of North Korea's debt. *Reuters*. September 18. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-korea-north-debt-idUSBRE88H0NH20120918/>

⁵ Asmolov Konstantin and Liudmila Zakharova. 2020. Russia's Relations with the DPRK in the 21st Century: Results of the First 20 Years. *Vestnik RUDN. International Relations*, 20 (3), p. 593. (In Russian)

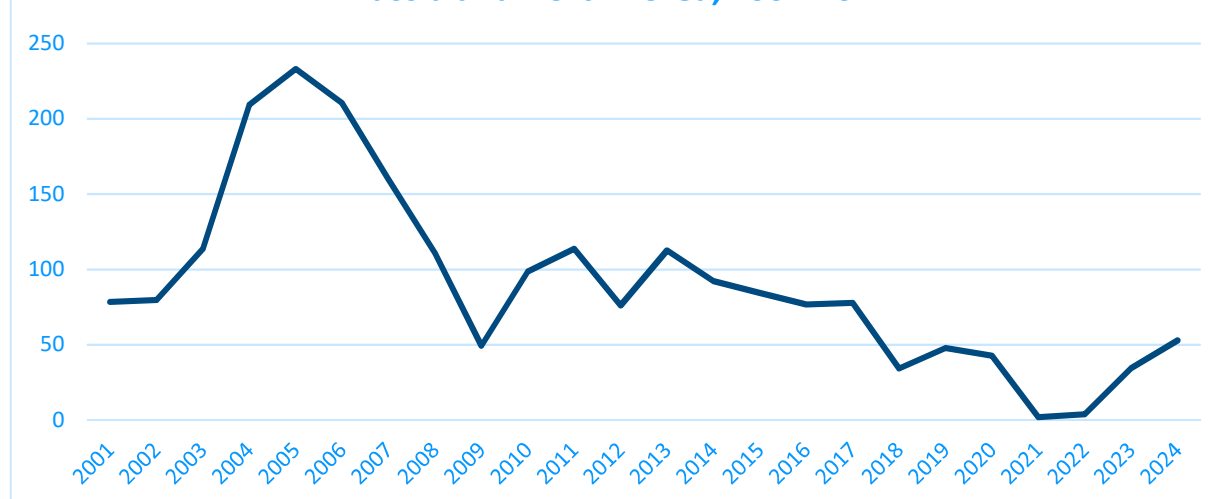
⁶ Zachary Cohen. 2017. New missile test shows North Korea capable of hitting all of US mainland. *CNN*. August 1. <https://edition.cnn.com/2017/11/28/politics/north-korea-missile-launch/index.html>

**Graph 1. North Korea's shift
in trade dependency, 1990-2023**



Source: KOTRA, Russian Federal Statistic State Service

**Graph 2. Trade trends between
Russia and North Korea, 2001-2024**

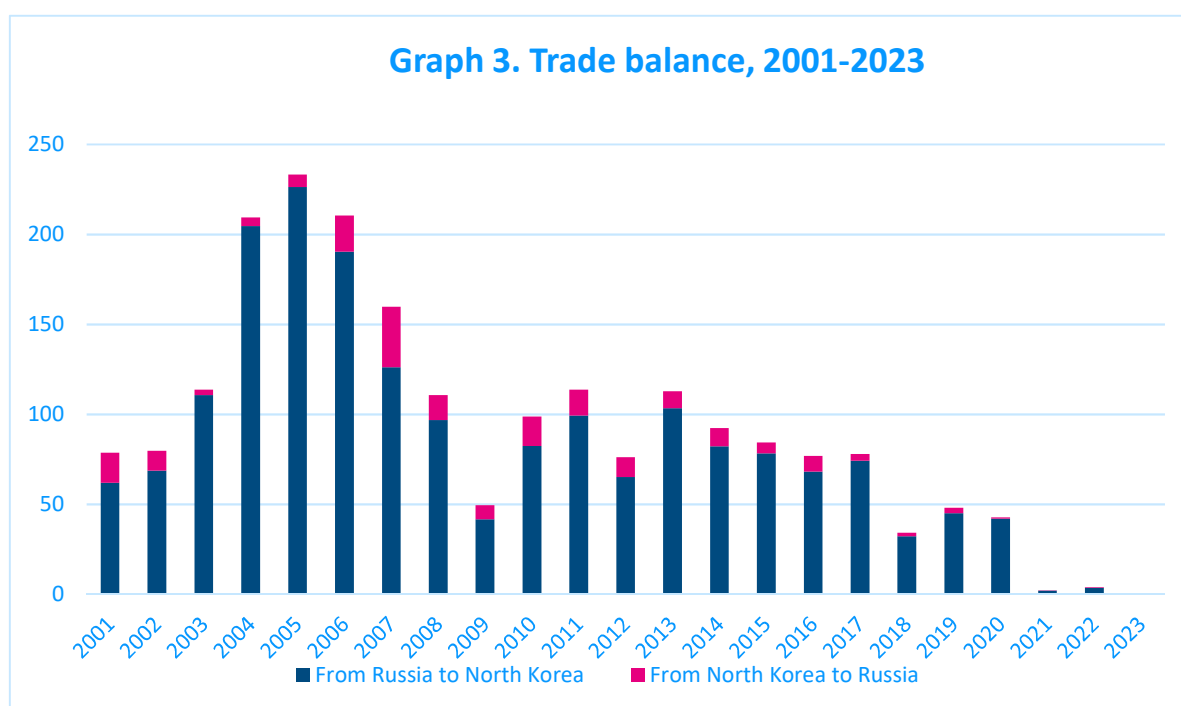


Source: Federal Customs Service of Russia; Ministry of Economic Development of the Russian Federation; The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation

Note: Figures provided are expressed in millions of U.S. dollars. The highest level of trade is observed in 2005 (\$233.2M). The lowest trade level is observed in 2021 (\$1.9M). The trade data for 2021 includes only figures from January to May due to the closure of common borders amid COVID-19. The trade data for 2023 is obtained through statements from the Minister of Natural Resources, Alexander Kozlov, indicating a trade volume of \$29 million from January to October, and from an advisor to the President of Russia on foreign policy issues, Yuri Ushakov, indicating a total of \$34.4 million from January to December. The trade data for 2024 includes figures only from January to May, based on a statement by President Putin during his visit to Pyongyang on June 19, 2024, claiming a 54% trade growth over this period. This data comes in the context of Russia's inconsistent history of publishing official reports in recent years. The Federal Customs Service of Russia, the main source of trade statistics, ceased publication in March 2022 and only partially resumed in March 2023, leaving much of the information on North Korea unpublished. As a result, there is no available data on the trade balance for 2023 and 2024.

Despite various efforts by Moscow to revive and strengthen economic ties with Pyongyang, including diplomatic engagements and proposed economic projects, the overall trend did not change significantly over the years. The highest trade turnover between Russia and North Korea was recorded in 2005, amounting to \$233.2 million. This resurgence, however, was short-lived. The volume of bilateral trade began to decline sharply, reaching a minimum of \$49.4 million in 2009 and subsequently stagnating around the \$100 million mark over the next five years. The mutual trade turnover experienced a significant reduction of 40% from 2013 to 2020. Notably, the decline in trade commenced in 2014, preceding the stringent sanctions

imposed by the United Nations Security Council on North Korea in 2017 (See Graph 2). One of the primary reasons why this negative dynamics persists is the fundamental incompatibility between the Russian and North Korean economies. Russia's abundant reserves of energy resources, metals, and other raw materials render North Korean main exports redundant for its market, while the lack of significant demand for North Korean agricultural products and manufactured goods further limits trade opportunities.⁷ This economic mismatch results in a persistent trade imbalance, with Russia traditionally exporting far more to North Korea than it imports (See Graph 3).



Source: Federal Customs Service of Russia; Ministry of Economic Development of the Russian Federation; The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation

Note: Figures provided are expressed in millions of U.S. dollars. The trade data for 2021 includes only figures from January to May due to the closure of common borders amid COVID-19. The Federal Customs Service of Russia, the main source of trade statistics, ceased publication in March 2022 and only partially resumed in March 2023, leaving much of the information on North Korea unpublished. As a result, there is no available data on the trade balance for 2023 and 2024.

⁷ Andrei Lankov. 2024. After the sanctions: why we shouldn't expect a revival of economic ties between Russia and the DPRK. *Forbes*. June 20. (In Russian) <https://www.forbes.ru/mneniya/515135-posle-sankcij-pocemu-ne-stoit-zdat-ozivlenia-ekonomiceskih-svazej-rossii-i-kndr>

III. Developments Since the Beginning of Russia's Full-Scale War Against Ukraine

3.1 Surge in Diplomatic Ties

In 2022, North Korea was among the few nations that voted against the UN General Assembly resolutions condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine.⁸ Pyongyang went even further by establishing diplomatic relations with the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Lugansk People's Republics⁹ and officially endorsing the results of referendums held in the DPR, LPR, Zaporizhzhia, and Kherson, thereby recognizing these breakaway regions as integral part of Russia.¹⁰ In return for these diplomatic gestures, Pyongyang anticipated substantial support from the Kremlin. While Moscow appreciated the move, it was not until 2023 that the relationship began to evolve into a more robust strategic partnership.

In July 2023, Pyongyang was visited by a Russian military delegation led by Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu to attend the celebrations of the 70th anniversary of the Korean War armistice.¹¹ Shoigu's visit occurred amid accusations that Pyongyang was supplying Russia with arms—claims that both Pyongyang and Moscow denied at the time. Notably, Shoigu's trip took place just 10 days after South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol's surprise visit to Ukraine, during which he pledged to supply the Ukrainian armed forces with essential frontline supplies.¹² Given this timing, Shoigu's visit to Pyongyang may have been, at least partly, a strategic response by the Kremlin to Yoon's pledges made in Kyiv.

In September 2023, reports surfaced that Kim Jong-un was traveling to Russia to meet with President Putin.¹³ While the official summit agenda emphasized economic cooperation and international security, the proximity of this visit to Sergei

Shoigu's recent trip to Pyongyang and the visited sites of Kim and Putin fueled widespread speculation that the primary objective was to negotiate an arms deal, including potential rewards North Korea. The summit took place at the Vostochny Cosmodrome, a symbolic choice considering North Korea's repeated failures at the time in launching a spy satellite.¹⁴ Following the meeting, Kim Jong-un also toured two aircraft manufacturing plants, Knevichi Airfield, and the Russian frigate Marshal Shaposhnikov. This focus on the air force, navy, and space sectors most likely highlighted the areas in which North Korea sought collaboration in exchange for its military assistance.¹⁵ Remarkably, this trip also came less than a month after the historic Camp David Summit, which sought to bolster trilateral security cooperation between the United States, South Korea, and Japan.¹⁶ Thus, Kim Jong-un's visit to Russia could be partly as a strategic response intended to signal that Pyongyang is similarly engaged in efforts to fortify its own partnerships.

Shoigu's visit to North Korea and the subsequent trip of Kim Jong-un to Russia precipitated a marked intensification of bilateral exchanges across various administrative levels and sectors, particularly in the fields of diplomacy, security, science, law, tourism, and agriculture. The frequency of official meetings averaged at least two per month. Since July 2023, the two countries have engaged in more than thirty high-level government, parliamentary, and other delegations, including 23 in 2024 alone, marking the highest-ever number of such visits (See Graph 4).

⁸ Derr, Arius and Chaewon Chung. 2022. North Korea votes against UN resolution condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine. *NK News*. March 3. <https://www.nknews.org/2022/03/north-korea-votes-against-un-resolution-condemning-russias-invasion-of-ukraine/>

⁹ Jewell, Ethan and Ifang Bremer. 2022. North Korea recognizes breakaway republics of Donetsk and Luhansk in Ukraine. *NK News*. July 14. <https://www.nknews.org/2022/07/north-korea-recognizes-breakaway-republics-of-donetsk-and-luhansk-in-ukraine/>

¹⁰ Bremer, Ifang. 2022. North Korea backs Russia's annexation of Ukrainian territory at UN. *NK News*. October 13. <https://www.nknews.org/2022/10/north-korea-backs-russias-annexation-of-ukrainian-territory-at-un/>

¹¹ Kwon, Hyuk-chul. 2023. North Korea boasts increasingly close ties with Russia on armistice anniversary. *The Hankyoreh*. July 31. https://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_northkorea/1102416.html

¹² PBS news. 2023. "South Korean President Yoon makes surprise visit to Ukraine, pledges to expand support". *PBS news*. July 25. <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/south-korean-president-yoon-makes-surprise-visit-to-ukraine-pledges-to-expand-support>

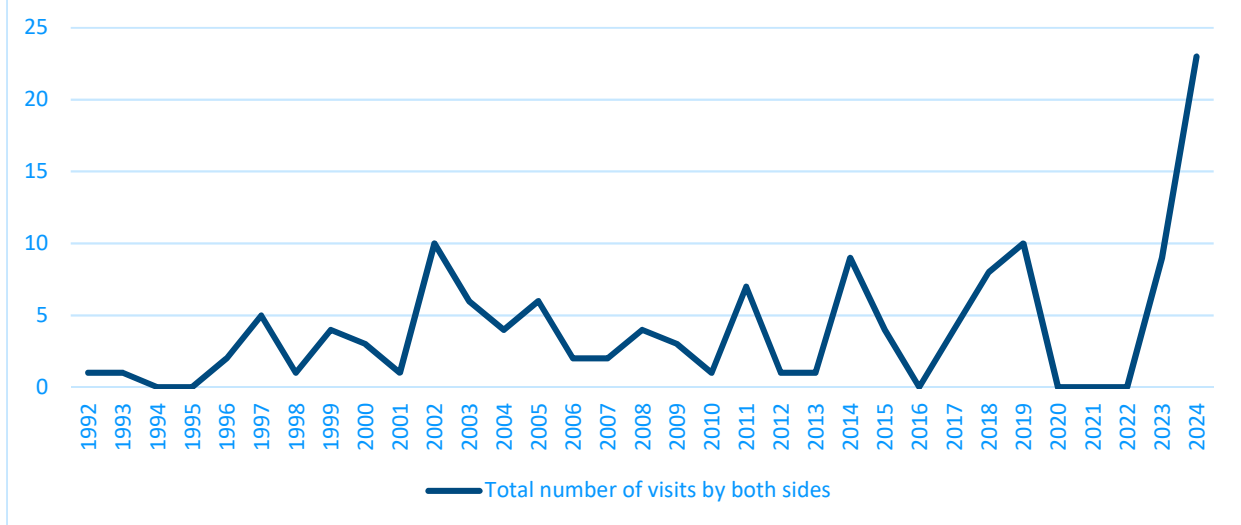
¹³ Wright, George and Kelly Ng. 2023. Kim Jong Un and Vladimir Putin meet for talks in Russia. *BBC*. September 13. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-66787449>

¹⁴ Panda, Ankit. 2023. Despite second launch failure, North Korea takes step toward spy satellite goals. *NK News*. August 25. <https://www.nknews.org/pro/despite-second-launch-failure-north-korea-takes-step-toward-spy-satellite-goals/>

¹⁵ Tunchinmang Langel. 2023. "Decoding Kim Jong-Un's visit to Russia". *Indian Council of World Affairs*. September 20. https://www.icwa.in/show_content.php?lang=1&level=3&ls_id=9944&lid=6353

¹⁶ Town, Jenny and Yuki Tatsumi. 2023. Takeaways from the Camp David Summit. *Stimson Center*. August 25. <https://www.stimson.org/2023/takeaways-from-the-camp-david-summit/>

Graph 4. Bilateral exchanges between Russia and North Korea, 1992-2024



Source: Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Weekly Report on North Korea by Korean Ministry of Unification, NK News.

The culmination of these interactions was marked by President Putin's visit to Pyongyang in June 2024, his first in 24 years. Kim and Putin managed to surprise the international community by announcing a comprehensive strategic partnership. Among the 24 provisions of the agreement, Article 4 attracted particular attention due to its implications for mutual defense. Specifically, the article stipulates that if one of the parties finds itself in a state of war due to an armed attack by one or more states, the other party will immediately provide military assistance by all available means.¹⁷ The ambiguity and lack of precision in the agreement's wording, however, raise questions about whether this provision implies automatic military intervention, as was explicitly outlined in the 1961 mutual assistance treaty, or whether it leaves room for each side to unilaterally determine the terms and extent of their potential involvement.

The mutual defence clause of Article 4 holds diplomatic significance. Given that Moscow is already entangled in a protracted war of attrition in Ukraine, it is unlikely that it would have willingly assumed additional obligations on the opposite end of Eurasia or that it saw the term as necessary to receive troops or weapons from North Korea. Therefore, it is more plausible that the inclusion of the article was a result of North Korean bargaining. Since the end of the Cold War, South Korea has consistently sought to cultivate a relationship with Moscow that is more favorable to Seoul than to Pyongyang. With Russia now ostensibly aligning more closely with North Korea, South Korea's diplomatic maneuverability with the Kremlin has been substantially diminished, marking a potential strategic victory for the Kim

regime. Another reason Pyongyang might have pursued the inclusion of the mutual defense article is to signal that the Russia-North Korea alliance is not merely a short-term arrangement—whether or not this aligns with the actual nature of the relationship. Strengthening ties with Russia is likely perceived by North Korea as a means to enhance its bargaining power not only in relation to the United States and South Korea, but perhaps more critically, in its strategic dealings with China.

An alarming aspect of the signed comprehensive partnership, is the potential for technological assistance that Russia may offer to North Korea within the framework of this collaboration. Speculation surrounding what President Putin may provide includes conventional weapons and aircraft, sophisticated missile guidance systems, advanced radar technologies, and acoustic systems for nuclear submarines. In the aftermath of the summit in Pyongyang, President Putin further exacerbated concerns by threatening to arm North Korea if the United States and its allies continue to supply Kyiv with sophisticated weaponry, a warning likely aimed at Seoul and Tokyo.¹⁸ These developments have raised substantial concerns, as an increasingly armed Pyongyang, bolstered by such support, could become even more provocative and dangerous.

According to a report of the Wall Street Journal, a secret clause in the agreement allowed North Korea to send 1000 troops to gain combat experience. That secret clause might be the foundation for further troop deployments,

¹⁷ Kelsey Davenport. 2024. "North Korea, Russia Strengthen Military Ties". Arms Control Association. July. <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2024-07/news/north-korea-russia-strengthen-military-ties>

¹⁸ Krebs, Katya et al. 2024. Putin threatens to arm North Korea if the West continues to supply weapons to Ukraine. *CNN*. June 21. <https://edition.cnn.com/2024/06/20/asia/putin-ukraine-north-korea-south-korea-intl-hnk/index.html>

3.2 Shift in Russia's Sanctions Policy Towards Pyongyang

In May 2022, Moscow for the first time vetoed a US-drafted UNSC resolution to strengthen sanctions on North Korea following its repeated ballistic missile tests in violation of previous UN resolutions¹⁹. This turn of events marked a shift in Russia's sanctions policy towards Pyongyang. Prior to the Ukraine invasion, Moscow obediently adhered to internationally agreed-upon restrictive measures, even when such measures adversely affected its own interests, such as the ban on utilizing North Korean labor. However, following its illegal war of aggression against Ukraine, the Kremlin significantly changed its stance on the issue. Initially, the shift in Russia's policy was motivated by the intention to reciprocate Pyongyang's diplomatic support for Moscow's war efforts. However, as bilateral relations deepened, the Kremlin recognized that easing sanctions was essential for facilitating trade transactions with North Korea, particularly in the arms sector. Consequently, by 2024, the policy of sanction alleviation had become a deliberate strategy aimed at enhancing economic and military cooperation with Pyongyang. In March 2024, Russia utilized its veto power to terminate the mandate of a UN expert panel tasked with assessing the implementation of sanctions on North Korea. In June 2024, following the summit in Pyongyang, Russian President Vladimir Putin openly declared that North Korean sanctions should be reconsidered, labeling them as "unilateral and illegal restrictive measures." He further announced that, while the sanctions regime remains intact, Russia and North Korea would develop unspecified trade and payment systems "that are not controlled by the West."²⁰ This series of actions underscores Russia's strategic pivot towards circumventing the existing sanctions framework and establishing independent mechanisms for bilateral interactions.

3.3 The Arms Deal

The intelligence reports indicating that Pyongyang might be supplying weapons to Moscow first surfaced in September 2022, roughly seven months after Russia launched its full-

scale invasion of Ukraine. While initially these reports were met with a degree of skepticism, largely due to the lack of hard evidence on the battlefield, the gradual quarterly reduction in the intensity of Russian artillery shelling suggested that the Kremlin indeed had been struggling with a shortage of ammunition. If in March-April 2022 Russian forces were firing approximately 70,000 to 80,000 rounds per day, by May this number had decreased to 60,000. By January 2023, the daily rate had further fallen to 20,000 projectiles, with subsequent drops to 14,000 in April-May, 12,000 by July-August, and 8,000 by November.²¹

This downward trend was likely owed to the miscalculations surrounding Russia's plans for a rapid offensive in Ukraine. Moscow apparently underestimated the possibility of a prolonged war, which ultimately led to the quick exhaustion of Russian stockpiles. Despite efforts to scale up domestic production, Russia's current output of around 250,000 artillery shells per month—equivalent to 3 million per year²²—can only sustain a daily firing rate below 10,000 rounds. While sufficient for maintaining low-intensity routine engagements, this volume is inadequate for frequent large-scale bombardments necessary to keep an advantage in the war of attrition. Failing to close the gap, Russia was compelled to seek external sources of ammunition, which likely led to its approach toward North Korea.

Convincing the Kim regime to assist evidently took some time, as the first shipment of military equipment to Russia was not delivered until August 2023,²³ nearly a year after intelligence initially reported on the possibility of an arms deal between Pyongyang and Moscow, which allows to suggest that negotiations were challenging and required considerable bargaining efforts. By October 2023, it was confirmed that North Korea had transferred over 1,000 containers of weaponry to Russia,²⁴ with shipments increasing to 6,700 containers by February 2024,²⁵ nearly doubling to either 13,000 (South Korean intelligence)²⁶ or 16,500 (U.S. intelligence) containers by August 2024,²⁷ and

¹⁹ Eric Ballbach. 2024. After Russia's Veto: The Future of the Sanctions Regime Against North Korea. *38 North*. April 12.

<https://www.38north.org/2024/04/after-russias-veto-the-future-of-the-sanctions-regime-against-north-korea/#:~:text=In%20May%202022%2C%20Russia%20and,before%20the%20recent%20Russian%20veto.>

²⁰ Kim Tong-Hyung. 2024. Before summit with North Korea's Kim, Putin vows they'll beat sanctions together. *The Times of Israel*. June 18.

<https://www.timesofisrael.com/before-summit-with-north-koreas-kim-putin-vows-theyll-beat-sanctions-together/>

²¹ Vladyslav Krasnitskyi. 2023. From 80,000 rounds per day to 8,000: Decline in Russian Artillery Activity. *Ukrainian Radio*. November 8. (In Ukrainian) <https://ukr.radio/news.html?newsID=102676>

²² Katie Bo Lillis et al. 2024. "Exclusive: Russia producing three times more artillery shells than US and Europe for Ukraine." *CNN*. March 11.

<https://edition.cnn.com/2024/03/10/politics/russia-artillery-shell-production-us-europe-ukraine/index.html>

²³ Sauer, Piotr. 2023. Evidence mounts of North Korean arms to Russia in threat for Ukraine. *The Guardian*. October 27.

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/oct/27/north-korean-arms-supply-russia-war-ukraine-munition-shipments>

²⁴ Song, Sang-ho. 2023. North Korea sent more than 1,000 containers of military equipment and munitions to Russia. *Yonhap News*. October 14. <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20231014000455315>

²⁵ Yang, Ji-ho and Park Su-hyeon. 2024. North Korea sends 6700 containers of ammo to Russia. *The Chosun Daily*. February 28.

<https://www.chosun.com/english/north-korea-en/2024/02/28/GJNZHL0KSRAAF0HT2YTUSPVKIA/>

²⁶ Chae Yun-hwan. 2024. North Korea sent over 13,000 containers suspected of carrying arms to Russia. *Yonhap News*. August 27.

<https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20240827008600315>

²⁷ Song Sang-ho. 2024. Russia has procured over 16,500 containers of munitions and related materiel from North Korea since last September. *Yonhap News*. September 05. <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20240905000900315>

eventually reaching 20,000 containers by October 2024.²⁸

While it is not possible to ascertain the precise distribution of the contents within these containers using satellite imagery alone, most analysts estimate that approximately 80-95% of the shipment consists of ammunition, primarily 152mm and 122mm artillery shells, with the remaining 5-20% comprising other forms of weaponry such as portable surface-to-air missiles, rifles, rocket launchers, and mortars.²⁹ The skewness in the assessments toward ammunition can be attributed to two major factors.

First, heavy weaponry appears to be delivered in separate batches and only periodically. For instance, North Korean short-range ballistic missiles KN-23/KN-24 were actively employed by Russia between late December 2023 and February 2024, after which their use paused for five months before resuming in July and August 2024. This break in exploitation suggests at least two scenarios. The deployment of KN-23/KN-24 missiles in Ukraine may have been part of a broader agreement between Moscow and Pyongyang, aimed not only at mitigating a potential shortage of Russian Iskander-M missiles,³⁰ but also at testing North Korean weaponry in a live combat environment, enabling the collection of performance data and the identification of deficiencies.³¹ Considering that the first tranche, allegedly consisting of 50 KN-23/KN-24s, demonstrated a 50% failure rate due to deviations from their programmed trajectories and premature detonation in the air,³² additional time was likely required for modifications to improve their precision and effectiveness, potentially through collaboration between the Russian military and North Korean engineers.³³ Another plausible scenario is that, with or without modifications, North Korea may have

simply needed time to produce another batch of 50 missiles for delivery to Russia. The KN-23 and KN-24 are relatively new models, with the KN-23 having undergone its first test in May 2019 and the KN-24 in August 2019. This suggests that North Korea may not have large stockpiles of these weapons. Given that Pyongyang would likely prefer to hold back some missiles for its own security, and provided that its production capacity is capped at 10-20 KN-23/KN-24s per month,³⁴ the five-month period likely reflects the time necessary to manufacture and deliver the additional 50 units. The examination of debris from the August attacks on Kyiv revealed that the missiles employed in the strike were manufactured in 2024,³⁵ suggesting that the five-month lapse in their use could be indeed linked to production-related factors. Whether North Korea aimed to implement improvements or simply needed time to assemble additional units remains unclear, particularly given that the newly launched missiles continue to experience premature detonations and demonstrate poor accuracy.^{36 37}

Second, missiles and missile systems seem to be delivered via rail, air or land rather than by sea. According to multiple intelligence reports, North Korea and Russia have consistently utilized 20-foot containers for their shipments.^{38 39} The interior dimensions of these containers can accommodate only 6-meter loads. The length of KN-23 and KN-24, for instance, ranges between 7 and 9 meters, meaning that even in a disassembled state these missiles would not fit within a standard 20-foot container.⁴⁰ Similarly, this constraint applies to anti-tank missile complex such as the Bulsae-4, the first sighting of which was documented

²⁸ Kim, Jeongmin. 2024. North Korea has sent 7,000 containers of weapons to Russia in last 2 months. *NK News*. October 23.

²⁹ Lara Jakes. 2024. "What Weapons Is North Korea Accused of Supplying to Russia?" *The New York Times*. June 17.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/06/17/world/europe/russia-north-korea-weapons-ukraine.html>

³⁰ Meduza. 2024. Russia now has Iranian missiles. Here's what that could mean for Ukraine. *Meduza*. September 20.

<https://meduza.io/en/feature/2024/09/19/russia-now-has-iranian-missiles-here-s-what-that-could-mean-for-ukraine>

³¹ Kucheryavets, Maria. 2024. Why did Russia start hitting Ukraine more often with North Korean missiles? *RBC-Ukraine*. August 13. (In Ukrainian)

<https://www.rbc.ua/rus/news/chomu-rf-stala-chastishe-biti-ukrayini-raketami-1723559454.html>

³² Jesus Mesa. 2024. "What Is the KN-23? North Korean Missile Shows 50% Failure Rate in Ukraine". *Newsweek*. May 14.

<https://www.newsweek.com/north-korea-missiles-23-russia-ukraine-1900393>

³³ Pyrig, Volodymyr. 2024. Why did Russia resume strikes on Ukraine with North Korean KN-23 missiles? *Hromadske radio*. August 14. (In Ukrainian)

<https://hromadske.radio/news/2024/08/14/chomu-rosiia-vidnovyla-udary-po-ukraini-pivnichnokoreyskymi-raketami-23-vidomilka-prychyn>

³⁴ Yang Wook. 2024. The military threat posed by North Korea, equipped with suicide drones superior to those of Russia. *Economy Chosun*.

September 14. (In Korean) <https://v.daum.net/v/20240914060033167>

³⁵ Ismay, John. 2024. North Korean Missiles Rain Down on Ukraine Despite Sanctions. *The New York Times*. September 11.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/09/11/us/russia-north-korea-missiles-ukraine.html>

³⁶ Rostislav Vons. 2024. On July 31, Russia attacked Ukraine with a North Korean ballistic missile. *Glavkom*. August 5. (In Ukrainian)

<https://glavkom.ua/country/incidents/rosija-31-lipnja-atakuvala-ukrajinu-balistichnoju-raketoju-pivnichnoji-koreji-zmi-1013752.html>

³⁷ Vitaly Besarab. 2024. On August 5, Russia attacked Kyiv with North Korean ballistic missiles. *Espresso*. August 6. (In Ukrainian)

<https://espresso.tv/viyna-z-rosiyeyu-defense-express-5-serpnya-rosiya-atakuvala-kiiv-pivnichnokoreyskimi-balistichnimi-raketami>

³⁸ Frontelligence Insight. 2023. "Counting the Rounds: North Korean Ammo Transfers to Russia". *Frontelligence Insight*. October 31.

<https://frontelligence.substack.com/p/counting-the-rounds-north-korean>

³⁹ Euromaidan press. 2024. "Mapping North Korea's discreet artillery ammo route to Russia". *Euromaidan press*. January 19.

<https://euromaidanpress.com/2024/01/19/mapping-north-koreas-discreet-artillery-ammo-route-to-russia/>

⁴⁰ Ji, Da-gyum. 2023. South Korean military detects signs of North Korea supplying ballistic missiles to Russia. *Asia News Network*. November

3. <https://asianews.network/south-korean-military-detects-signs-of-north-korea-supplying-ballistic-missiles-to-russia/>

near Kharkiv in late July 2024.⁴¹ Available data suggests that the vehicle's length exceeds 7 meters,⁴² indicating that it, too, would not fit within such a container.

In light of these factors, it can reasonably be assumed that approximately 95% of all shipments consist primarily of North Korean ammunition. While the figure of 20,000 containers may seem formidable, the quality and operational effectiveness of the delivered artillery rounds are rather questionable, with failure rates reportedly being comparable to those observed in KN-23/KN-24 missiles. According to Ukrainian military officials, around half of all North Korean shells are defective, with most originating from the 1970s and 1980s. A significant portion of these shells are non-functional, while the remainder require restoration or inspection prior to use.⁴³ These assessments align with numerous reports from Russian soldiers. According to their accounts, North Korean shells frequently fail to reach their intended targets due to inconsistencies in the powder charges. The low quality of the powder results in shells being utilized in situations where "accuracy, reliability, and even the successful exit of the projectile from the barrel are of minimal importance."⁴⁴

Considering the scale of the arms transfer and the reported poor quality of the delivered weapons, a critical question arises regarding the financial cost of North Korea's military assistance to Russia. Given that assessments may vary depending on differing assumptions and the calculation methods employed, this policy paper aims not to determine an exact figure but rather to evaluate the range of the potential cost of the deal, based on the type, quantity, and possible pricing of the North Korean weapons supplied to Russia.

According to recent reports, the number of containers sent from North Korea to Russia is estimated to be around 20,000. Assuming that 5% of these shipments consist of supplementary materials or equipment, it can be inferred that approximately 19,000 containers are filled solely with ammunition. Experts suggest that around 75-85% of these containers carry 152mm shells, while 15-25% contain 122mm rounds. The upper estimates of 85% (152mm) to 15% (122mm) seem to be more plausible, not only because 152mm shells offer greater range and explosive power,

which Russia seems to prioritize, but also because the majority of Russia's modern artillery platforms are designed to fire 152mm rounds.

Based on various measurements and assessments, it is presumed that a 20-foot shipping container can accommodate approximately 276 crates of 152mm shells or 264 crates of 122mm rounds. Each crate of 152mm ammunition holds a single unit, whereas a crate of 122mm ammunition contains two units.⁴⁵ Taking these figures as a baseline for calculations, the total number of ammunition deliveries can be approximated as follows:

For 152mm: 276 (ammo crates per container) * 16,150 (85% of containers) * 1 (number of artillery shells per box) = 4,457,400 pieces.

For 122mm: 264 (ammo crates per container) * 2,850 (15% of containers) * 2 (number of artillery shells per box) = 1,504,800 pieces.

Total: 4,457,400 (152mm) + 1,504,800 (122mm) = 5,962,200 pieces.⁴⁶

Beyond ammunition, the only confirmed North Korean-manufactured weapons used in Ukraine include the KN-23/KN-24 ballistic missiles and the Bulsae-4 anti-tank missile complex. Based on the aforementioned information, it can be inferred that Russia likely received only two batches of KN-23 and KN-24 missiles, the first in the fall of 2023 and the second in the summer of 2024, each likely comprising 50 units, bringing the total number of missiles of this type to an estimated 100. In the case of Bulsae-4, a leaked catalog of North Korean military assets for sale suggests that the complex is comprised of three components, each of which can be purchased individually in separate sets: the missiles are available in batches of 100, guidance launchers in sets of 10, and checking devices for the missile and launcher in sets of 2.⁴⁷ Provided that the Bulsae-4 vehicle was spotted in Ukraine only in July 2024, and given that North Korean weapons tend to underperform, it is unlikely that Russia would have acquired more than two complex sets without first evaluating their battlefield effectiveness.

⁴¹ Global Defense News. 2024. North Korean Bulsae-4 Anti-Tank Missile Vehicle Reportedly Spotted in Ukraine for First Time. *Global Defense News*. July 30. <https://armyrecognition.com/news/army-news/army-news-2024/north-korean-bulsae-4-missile-system-reportedly-spotted-in-ukraine-for-first-time>

⁴² Global Defence News. 2024. Bulsae-4 M-2018. *Global Defence News*. September 6. <https://armyrecognition.com/military-products/army/anti-tank-systems-and-vehicles/wheeled-anti-tank-vehicles/bulsae-4-m-2018>

⁴³ John Feng. 2024. "Half of Russia's North Korea-Made Artillery Shells Don't Work: Ukraine". *Newsweek*. February 27. <https://www.newsweek.com/half-russia-north-korea-made-artillery-shells-do-not-work-vadym-skibitsky-1873612>

⁴⁴ Mind. 2024. "Russian military complains about the poor quality of North Korean shells". *Mind*. January 12. <https://mind.ua/en/news/20268106-absolute-sht-russian-military-complains-about-the-poor-quality-of-north-korean-shells>

⁴⁵ Frontelligence Insight. 2023. "Counting the Rounds: North Korean Ammo Transfers to Russia". *Frontelligence Insight*. October 31. <https://frontelligence.substack.com/p/counting-the-rounds-north-korean>

⁴⁶ Estimates, projecting the transfer of over 6 million units of ammunition, appear to be based on a different assumption regarding the distribution of 152mm and 122mm rounds within the containers. Denisova, Kateryna. 2024. Seoul says North Korea could have sent over 6 million artillery shells to Russia. *The Kyiv Independent*. August 27. <https://kyivindependent.com/north-korea-could-have-sent-over-6-million-artillery-shells-to-russia-seoul-says/>

⁴⁷ Mads Brügger. 2020. *The Mole: Undercover in North Korea*. Documentary. The price list on 1:43:57. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w4S99jiNXiw>

As for the price of each item, Russian-produced 122mm ammunition is estimated to cost approximately \$500 per unit, while the price for 152mm rounds ranges between \$800 and \$1,000 per unit.^{48 49 50 51} Given that North Korea supplies Russia with ammunition produced in the 1970s and 1980s, the price for North Korean 122mm rounds is likely to be between \$150 and \$300 per unit, and for 152mm rounds, between \$300 and \$500 per unit. The exact cost North Korea negotiated with Russia remains uncertain, as Pyongyang has a track record of selling weapons at both below and above market rates.⁵² Given Russia's urgent need for ammunition, it is possible that North Korea sought prices comparable to those of newly manufactured Russian munitions. Leaked documents from September 2022 reveal that Russia paid Iran significantly above market value for ammunition: \$726 for new 122mm rounds and \$625 for stockpiled ones, as well as \$1,190 for new 152mm rounds compared to \$650 for older stock.⁵³ It is unclear whether North Korea managed to secure a similar deal, especially considering reports of Iranian ammunition being of significantly higher quality. Nonetheless, with a precedent of overpaying, it is reasonable to estimate both the lower and upper bounds of the potential pricing. In the case of KN-23 and KN-24 missiles, the price per unit is reported to range between \$1.5 million and \$3 million.^{54 55} For the components of the Bulsae-4 complex, North Korea charges \$42,000 per missile, \$65,000 per launcher and \$35,000 per checking device.⁵⁶

Taking into account potential price variations, the total cost of the arms deal is estimated to range between \$1.72 billion and \$5.52 billion, as outlined below:

Low Estimate:

\$1,717,860,000 (for \$300/152mm, \$150/122mm, \$1.5 million/KN-23/24, 1 Bulsae-4 set)

\$2,839,980,000 (for \$500/152mm, \$300/122mm, \$1.5 million/KN-23/24, 2 Bulsae-4 sets)

High Estimate:

\$4,628,160,000 (for \$800/152mm, \$500/122mm, \$3 million/KN-23/24, 2 Bulsae-4 sets)

\$5,519,640,000 (for \$1,000/152mm, \$500/122mm, \$3 million/KN-23/24, 2 Bulsae-4 sets)

3.4 Military Collaboration

Concerns over the potential deployment of North Korean troops to Ukraine in support of Russia first emerged in August 2022, following reports that the Kim regime intended to send around 1,000 workers to Donbas⁵⁷ and subsequent unverified claims in Russian state media that Pyongyang was prepared to dispatch 100,000 "volunteers" to assist the Kremlin in its war efforts.⁵⁸ It was not until October 2024, however, when Ukrainian officials claimed that they identified six of the twenty soldiers killed in a missile strike near Donetsk as DPRK officers.⁵⁹ The incident has sparked considerable debate regarding the true objectives of these soldiers in Ukraine and whether more troops should be expected to follow.

There are two primary reasons why the direct involvement of North Korean combat forces seems plausible. First, Russia is facing a significant shortage of military personnel. According to reports, provincial officials are failing to meet more than a third of their recruitment quotas⁶⁰ despite

⁴⁸ Pavel Voronov. 2023. How Much Does a Round Cost? *Ferra*. January 23. (In Russian) <https://www.ferra.ru/review/techlife/skolko-stoit-vystrel-ot-avtomata-kalashnikova-do-gaubicy.htm>

⁴⁹ Dmitri Popov. 2023. Shells for Ukraine have become 1.5 times more expensive. *Moskovskij Komsomolets* January 24. (In Russian) <https://www.mk.ru/politics/2023/10/24/snaryady-dlya-ukrainy-podorozhali-v-poltora-raza-sklady-pusty.html>

⁵⁰ The new voice of Ukraine. 2024. Russia outproduces West in artillery shells, raising challenges for Ukraine. *The new voice of Ukraine*. May 26. <https://english.nv.ua/nation/russian-artillery-shells-produced-nearly-four-times-faster-and-cheaper-than-nato-s-50421920.html>

⁵¹ Boyko Nikolov. 2024. Every day, Russia produces 12,320 artillery shells at \$1K each. *Bulgarian Military*. May 26. <https://bulgarianmilitary.com/2024/05/26/every-day-russia-produces-12320-artillery-shells-at-1k-each/>

⁵² Daniel Salisbury and Darya Dolzikova. 2023. Profiting from Proliferation? North Korea's Exports of Missile and Nuclear Technology. RUSI. December. <https://static.rusi.org/onward-proliferation-dprk-occasional-paper-dec-2023.pdf>

⁵³ Contract #IR-RU-2022 6001/1 #P/2236478020960 for delivery of ammunition. 2022. *The Ministry of Defense and Logistic of Armed Forces of Iran*. September 14. <https://components.news.sky.com/files/Ir-Ru-Contract-Scanned.pdf>

⁵⁴ Yevhen Buderatskyi and Yevhen Kizilov. 2024. "North Korean KN-24 missile leaves huge crater in Bucha district". *Ukrainska Pravda*. February 16. <https://www.pravda.com.ua/eng/news/2024/02/16/7442218/>

⁵⁵ Kim, Seong-hoon. 2024. North Korea transforms into Russia's weapon supplier, selling 720 billion won worth of shells last year. *Maeil Business Newspaper*. September 3. (In Korean) <https://www.mk.co.kr/news/politics/11108473>

⁵⁶ Mads Brügger. 2020. *The Mole: Undercover in North Korea*. Documentary. The price list on 1:43:57. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w4S99jNXiw>

⁵⁷ Zwirko, Colin. 2022. North Korea confirms plan to send workers to Russia-occupied Ukraine. *NK News*. August 2. <https://www.nknews.org/2022/08/north-korea-confirms-plan-to-send-workers-to-russia-occupied-ukraine/>

⁵⁸ Nelken-Zitser, Joshua. 2022. North Korea offering 100,000 troops to help defeat Ukraine, Russian state media says. *Business Insider*. August 7. <https://www.businessinsider.com/north-korea-offering-russia-100k-troops-help-beat-ukraine-reports-2022-8>

⁵⁹ Zakharchenko, Kateryna. 2024. Missile strike near Donetsk eliminates 6 North Korean officers. *Kyiv Post*. October 4. <https://www.kyivpost.com/post/40037>

⁶⁰ Gordienko, Olga. 2024. Russia may face new mobilization due to troop shortages amid Kursk incursion. *United24Media*. August 13. <https://united24media.com/latest-news/russia-may-face-new-mobilization-due-to-troop-shortages-amid-kursk-incursion-bloomberg-says->

increasingly generous financial incentives introduced by the government.⁶¹ Based on the current estimates, Putin needs to secure at least 500,000 people in the next 12 months to offset troop losses and rotate his forces in Ukraine.⁶² To mitigate this manpower deficit, Russia has resorted to enlisting foreign fighters, drawing individuals from regions such as the Middle East, Central Asia, India, and Africa. Thus far, however, these efforts have resulted in the recruitment of only 20,000 soldiers,⁶³ which suggests that Moscow might be increasingly interested in potential reinforcements from North Korea.

Second, the DPRK has a history of involvement in military conflicts abroad, not only through arms sales, training, and technical assistance but also through the deployment of its special forces, as seen during the Libyan-Egyptian War,⁶⁴ the Angolan Civil War,⁶⁵ and the Vietnam War.⁶⁶ Given the significant monetary rewards promised by the Kremlin to foreign fighters, the Kim regime might view sending troops to Ukraine as an opportunity to enhance its financial standing. Even under conservative estimates, Kim Jong-un could potentially accumulate between \$143 million and \$572 million in additional annual revenue if he were to commit between 5,000 and 20,000 personnel to support Russia's war effort.⁶⁷ Apart from financial benefits, the regime might be equally interested in gaining firsthand combat experience to study contemporary warfare, as well as securing access to Western weapons.

The overall capacity of the DPRK's military could hypothetically allow Kim Jong-un to deploy up to 100,000 troops to Ukraine. Realistically, however, the likelihood of such a commitment seems improbable for several reasons. First, over the past two years, Kim Jong-un has shown increasing reluctance to send North Korean citizens abroad. Despite Russia's high demand for labor the number of incoming North Korean workers has remained astonishingly low. If previously, the quantity of North Korean workers

consistently present in Russia stood at around 40,000, this figure now scarcely reaches 7,000, with more than 6,000 representing DPRK individuals who have stayed in Russia since 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic.⁶⁸ This reluctance to supply a labor force might be a sign of the regime's efforts to limit the population's exposure to the outside world. If such a caution is demonstrated with civilian workers, the hesitation to send soldiers abroad is likely to be even more pronounced.

Second, the deployment of a large number of soldiers poses challenges in controlling their movements on the ground, heightening the possibility of desertion or defection. The dispatch of such a force would require security personnel to closely monitor the troops, ensuring they do not flee. This, however, could overstretch the resources and personnel committed.

Third, North Korea cannot afford to deplete its valuable human resources, particularly given that its primary adversary, South Korea, has a population twice its size. Considering that Russia's need for assault infantry is paramount, any contingent sent by the regime would likely face high mortality rates. Therefore, by deploying troops overseas, DPRK risks undermining its capacity to defend its own borders, especially if hostilities were to erupt on the Korean Peninsula.

While Kim Jong-un might be reluctant to send regular troops to Ukraine, he could still consider deploying special forces and engineer units capable of supporting both combat and non-combat operations. This move would align well with North Korea's longstanding practice of offering military assistance in regions like the Middle East and Africa, where DPRK's involvement has often encompassed a blend of combat engagement and logistical or technical support. In fact, recent reports suggest that around 3,000 North

1723

⁶¹ The Kremlin has systematically increased the one-time signing bonuses for volunteers from \$2,200 in 2022 to \$4,600 by 2024. Some regions currently offer even more substantial amounts, with Moscow providing bonuses up to \$22,000, and the Belgorod region setting a record at \$31,200. See Meduza. 2024. Putin doubles army sign-on bonus, offering new recruits \$4,600 to fight in Ukraine. *Meduza*. July 31 <https://meduza.io/en/news/2024/07/31/putin-doubles-army-sign-on-bonus-offering-new-recruits-4-600-to-fight-in-ukraine>; Korshak, Stefan. 2024. Russia offers record signing-on bounty to volunteer for army service. *Kyiv Post*. October 8 <https://www.kyivpost.com/post/40203>

⁶² Gordiienko, Olga. 2024. Russia may face new mobilization due to troop shortages amid Kursk incursion. *United 24 Media*. August 13 <https://united24media.com/latest-news/russia-may-face-new-mobilization-due-to-troop-shortages-amid-kursk-incursion-bloomberg-says-1723>

⁶³ Stevens, Harry. 2024. Strangers in the Motherland: the dynamics of Russia's foreign recruitment. *War on the rocks*. September 13 <https://warontherocks.com/2024/09/strangers-in-the-motherland-the-dynamics-of-russias-foreign-recruitment/>

⁶⁴ The New York Times. 1979. North Koreans Piloting for Libya. *The New York Times*. February 12 <https://www.nytimes.com/1979/02/12/archives/north-koreans-piloting-for-libya.html>

⁶⁵ Ross, Eleanor. 2017. North Korea's most surprising acquaintances. *Newsweek*. March 22 <https://www.newsweek.com/north-korea-ally-572012>

⁶⁶ Pribbenow, Merle. 2011. North Korean Pilots in the Skies over Vietnam. *NKIDP e-Dossier no. 2*. Woodrow Wilson Center. <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/north-korean-pilots-the-skies-over-vietnam>

⁶⁷ The estimate is based on Russia's promise of a one-time bonus of \$4,600 and a monthly salary of \$2,000 for recruits, assuming that all the funds would be allocated directly to the North Korean regime, with no percentage deducted for the soldiers themselves. See Sokolova-Stekha, Hanna. 2024. How Russia is recruiting foreigners to fight in Ukraine. *DW news*. August 22 <https://www.dw.com/en/how-russia-is-recruiting-foreigners-to-fight-in-ukraine/a-70019040>

⁶⁸ O'Carroll, Chad. 2024. UN reports that 100K North Koreans still earning money for regime overseas. *NK News*. March 21 <https://www.nknews.org/2024/03/100k-north-koreans-still-earning-money-for-regime-overseas-un-report/>

Koreans are already undergoing training in Russia,⁶⁹ with an additional 10,000 soldiers being prepared for deployment to Vladivostok in the near future.⁷⁰ Although the presence of DPRK forces has been confirmed by Ukrainian,⁷¹ South Korean,⁷² and U.S. intelligence,⁷³ speculation regarding the exact scale and objectives of this military dispatch continues to grow. According to various sources, the number of North Korean soldiers currently present in Russia is estimated to range between 1,500 and 2,900. The figure approximating 3,000 appears rather plausible, not only because such a contingent could have been moved to Russia undetected, but also because it aligns with past DPRK patterns of deploying military personnel abroad. For instance, North Korea dispatched a similar number of troops to Angola in the 1970s and 1980s,⁷⁴ and more recently to Syria in 2016.⁷⁵ Considering the number of weapons that requires North Korean oversight, and the scale of the war against Ukraine, the regime, in perspective, could potentially provide Russia with additional 3 to 4 units, comprising 15,000 to 20,000 soldiers of various skills. Even in such a case, however, North Korean assistance is unlikely to change the overall course of the war.

That said, the deployment could still be used as an effective psychological tool. With numerous videos now circulating on social media, it is plausible that Russia might be deliberately fostering uncertainty around North Korean arrivals to inflate both the purpose and scale of DPRK involvement. By doing so, Moscow may expect that the perceived direct engagement of Pyongyang in the conflict could prompt Western powers to enter negotiations under conditions more favorable to Russia. This tactic, however, is likely to backfire, as both the West and South Korea have already started discussing the possibility of offering more active assistance to Ukraine in response to these developments.

3.5 Economic Ties

According to available data, there was a steady growth in commercial ties between the two countries from 2022 to 2024. In 2022, the trade volume constituted \$3.78 million,

rising nine-fold to \$34.4 million in 2023, and further increasing to \$52.9 million between January and May 2024. This upward trend suggests a potential return to pre-sanction levels, when the average trade volume between the two states hovered around \$100 million annually. The possible restoration of pre-2014 patterns marks a significant recovery, especially in contrast to the 2018-2020 period, when annual turnover stood at approximately \$45 million (See Graph 2). While the 2024 figure of \$52.9 million reflects substantial growth in commercial ties at the bilateral level, it still remains relatively modest on a broader scale, particularly when compared to the substantially larger trade volumes between North Korea and China. In 2023, Russia accounted for just 2% of North Korea's trade, while China commanded a staggering 97% (See Graph 1). This imbalance is unlikely to shift in Moscow's favor in the near future, largely due to the limited range of goods that North Korea can offer to Russia. As a result, even if trade between the two countries surpasses the \$100 million mark in 2024, this dynamic will likely reflect sanctions evasion, marking a return to trading goods regularly exchanged before international restrictions, rather than a true expansion or diversification of the trade relationship.

As evident from the figures above, the reported statistics do not account for the arms deal, which is estimated to range between \$1.72 and \$5.52 billion. This omission suggests that transactions involving weapons might be conducted through a Soviet-style barter system, or a mixture of barter and cash. The latter scenario appears more plausible, as it is unlikely that the Kim regime would have agreed to enter into the arrangement without securing a substantial inflow of hard currency, which North Korea urgently needs to sustain its struggling economy. On the barter front, experts identify two primary items of exchange: food and oil.⁷⁶ In March 2024, the first direct seaborne shipments of oil were delivered to North Korea since the introduction of UN sanctions in 2017. Satellite images from March reveal that at least five North Korean oil tankers departed from the Far Eastern Russian port of Skhidnyi.⁷⁷

Another potential source of bilateral revenue could be North

⁶⁹ Orlova, Alisa and Kateryna Zakharchenko. 2024. Russia is Forming a Battalion of North Korean Soldiers Due to Severe Manpower Shortages. *Kyiv Post*. October 15 <https://www.kyivpost.com/post/40556>

⁷⁰ Cho, Ki-weon. 2024. Zelenskyy says North Korea is preparing to send 10,000 troops to fight for Russia. *Hankyoreh*. October 18. https://www.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_international/1163259.html

⁷¹ Altman, Howard. 2024. Nearly 11,000 North Korean Troops In Russia Preparing To Enter The Fight Says Ukraine's Spy Boss. *The Warzone*. October 17. <https://www.twz.com/news-features/nearly-11000-north-korean-troops-in-russia-preparing-to-enter-the-fight-says-ukraines-spy-boss>

⁷² Yi, Wonju. 2024. North Korea decides to dispatch 12,000 soldiers to support Russia in Ukraine war: South Korean spy agency. *Yonhap News*. October 18 <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20241018006852315>

⁷³ Mithill Aggarwall, 2024. North Korean troops have been sent to Russia, U.S. confirms. *NBC News* <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/north-korean-troops-sent-russia-us-confirms-war-ukraine-rcna176346>

⁷⁴ Sorge, Helmut. 2023. Crossing the Nuclear Rubicon. *Policy Center for The New South*. August 31 <https://www.policycenter.ma/publications/crossing-nuclear-rubicon>

⁷⁵ Ramani, Samuel. 2021. The North Korean-Syrian Partnership: Bright Prospects Ahead. *38 North*. March 23. <https://www.38north.org/2021/03/the-north-korean-syrian-partnership-bright-prospects-ahead/>

⁷⁶ Kim Arin. 2024. "Russia sending North Korea food in return for arms: Seoul defense chief". *The Korea Herald*. February 27. <https://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20240227050728>

⁷⁷ Oleksandra Opanasenko. 2024. "Russia is shipping oil directly to North Korea in exchange for weapons". *Babel*. March 26. <https://babel.ua/en/news/105342-ft-russia-is-shipping-oil-directly-to-north-korea-in-exchange-for-weapons>

Korean labor. Reports indicate that Pyongyang has been actively recruiting additional workers for deployment to Russia,⁷⁸ with some even suggesting that these workers have been already sent to the Russian Far East ahead of the Kim-Putin summit.⁷⁹ Russian sources, however, point that as of June 2024, local companies still face penalties for employing North Korean workers.⁸⁰ The Russian Far East, which has historically struggled with worker shortages, now confronts an even greater demand amid the war against Ukraine.

⁷⁸ Jeong Seo-yeong. 2024. "North Korea is recruiting more workers to send to Russia". *Daily NK*. July 31.

<https://www.dailynk.com/english/north-korea-recruiting-more-workers-send-russia/>

⁷⁹ Seulkee Jang. 2024. "North Korea sent workers to Russia before Putin-KJU summit". *Daily NK*. July 15.

<https://www.dailynk.com/english/north-korea-sent-workers-russia-before-putin-kim-jong-un-summit/>

⁸⁰ Meduza. 2024. "Despite friendship with the DPRK, Russia continues to punish its companies for hiring North Korean workers". *Meduza*. June 16. (In Russian) <https://meduza.io/cards/nemotrya-na-druzhbu-s-kndr-rossiya-prodolzhaet-nakazyvat-svoi-kompanii-za-naem-severokoreyskih-rabochih-pochemu>

IV. Unpacking the Alliance

The access to critical arms was not the only strategic advantage Pyongyang had to offer. Strengthening ties with North Korea promised Russia an additional geopolitical gain: a measure of leverage in the increasingly contested Indo-Pacific region. Naturally, Russia's presence in the area cannot be compared to that of China and the United States. For this reason, ties with Pyongyang are primarily seen as a bargaining tool in relations with Seoul and Tokyo, aimed at heightening tensions around the Korean Peninsula to divert attention from Europe and reduce support for Ukraine.

In the case of North Korea, the war in Ukraine was initially perceived as an opportunity to end isolation. By supporting Russia's war effort, Pyongyang expected Moscow to reciprocate by helping to ease the harsh sanctions imposed in 2017. As Russia's relations with the West deteriorated, North Korea saw Moscow's growing diplomatic estrangement from Europe as a strategic opportunity to diversify its diplomatic and economic engagements. Closer ties with Moscow could provide North Korea with greater leverage in bargaining with China, thereby reducing its overwhelming dependency on Beijing. Russia's growing international isolation and its failure to secure decisive victory in Ukraine, however, created an environment that North Korea had not experienced since the Cold War: a position of increased strategic value for Moscow. Recognizing Russia's need for ammunition and understanding that this need might not last indefinitely, Pyongyang viewed the situation as a window of opportunity not only for increased food and energy supplies but also for acquiring arms and technical expertise.

Despite these mutual expectations and a current alignment of interests, the duration and scope of cooperation between Russia and North Korea are likely to be limited. While concerns persist in the West that the Kremlin might transfer advanced military technologies to Pyongyang, potentially emboldening the regime's aggressive behavior, Putin's support for North Korea is expected to remain constrained for several reasons.

First, North Korea is not a reliable partner. It has a lengthy record of engaging in provocative behaviors infuriating its allies. Neither perceived convergence of strategic goals nor excessive economic dependence on its strategic partners typically factor into the regime's decision-making when it pursues its own political objectives. The Kim regime has a deep aversion to any perceived or actual external dependencies. Although it benefits from the current situation, particularly by balancing China's influence, Pyongyang may once again distance itself from Moscow in an effort to keep both of its powerful patrons at arm's length. As the history of bilateral relations shows, North Korea's attitudes toward Russia can shift rapidly from strategic cooperation to disengagement, tension, and even outright hostility. For the Kremlin, arming such an erratic neighbor with advanced weaponry is tantamount to engaging in geopolitical self-sabotage.

Second, Pyongyang has a track record of engaging in

proliferation for financial gain. Given the regime's shifting alliances and strategic priorities, any technology provided to North Korea could easily end up with hostile governments or even Russia's adversaries. This becomes especially plausible if Pyongyang, frustrated by Kremlin policies, decides to use its enhanced military capabilities against Moscow or its allies. Indulgence of North Korea's nuclear ambitions could also intensify the ongoing arms race in the Indo-Pacific, prompting neighboring countries like South Korea and Japan to bolster their own defenses.

Third, the sustainability of a long-term supply of North Korean weapons is rather questionable, given Pyongyang's own need for ordnance to balance South Korea's firepower and its production capacity limitations conditioned by chronic electricity shortages. North Korean aid can only support Russia's immediate military needs, providing a temporary tactical edge but falling far short of ensuring a prolonged strategic advantage. From Moscow's perspective, exchanging sophisticated and costly technologies for significantly inferior, though urgently needed, North Korean conventional arms—which offer limited utility—does not present a fair or compelling proposition.

Forth, by equipping North Korea with sensitive technologies Russia risks jeopardizing its relations with China. Prioritizing regional stability, Beijing might be not inclined to tolerate stronger and more provocative Pyongyang at its borders. To signal its disapproval, China could choose to penalize Moscow for its counterproductive actions by scaling back economic investments and diminishing diplomatic backing. For Russia, losing access to both Asian and European markets would mean a significant contraction in its economic sphere of influence, limiting its ability to sustain prolonged military campaigns and affecting its overall economic stability.

Fifth, Moscow's engagement with Pyongyang's nuclear program would undermine any future rapprochement with the West, an objective that Russia is likely to pursue once it has ended its illegal war against Ukraine. Post-war reconciliation with European nations would require extensive diplomatic engagement and the reconstruction of mutual trust, efforts that would be rendered futile if Russia is perceived as a rogue state proliferating weapons of mass destruction to volatile regimes. Solidified vision of Moscow as a destabilizing force in global politics would diminish any remaining goodwill and make the path to normalization of relations with Western countries even more exceedingly arduous.

Some might assert that Russia's role in facilitating North Korea's spy satellite launch is indicative of Moscow's predisposition to share advanced technologies with Pyongyang. Given the mixed outcomes of this collaboration, however, it is premature to draw definitive conclusions. The initial success of the Malligyong-1 launch in November 2023 was overshadowed by subsequent issues, as by February 2024, it became evident that the satellite was orbiting Earth

without any operational activity, indicating a malfunction.⁸¹ Notably, a second launch attempt in May 2024 failed to replicate even the partial success of the first, despite Russia's alleged continued support.⁸² This inconsistency in the results suggests two potential developments, which are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

First, failures might be related to the difficulties that the Russian space program has faced in recent years due to the damaging effects of Western sanctions. Prior to the imposition of the first restrictions in 2014, imports—primarily high-tech microchips—accounted for 42% of the components used in Russia's satellite systems.⁸³ Since then, efforts to produce domestic alternatives, apparently, have encountered major obstacles, resulting in frequent launch failures, technical malfunctions, and a reduced capacity to maintain a strong satellite network.^{84 85 86} Roscosmos, which once launched nine satellites at a time, now struggles to deploy just one or two.⁸⁷

Second, Russia's aid may have been intentionally superficial. The Kremlin might be employing a strategic bargaining tactic by providing only nominal support, while deliberately reserving full assistance until it becomes necessary or strategically advantageous. This approach could allow Russia to maintain leverage over Pyongyang while avoiding overcommitting resources.

In any case, it seems plausible that the initial promise of assistance in space might have been a strategic decoy to prompt North Korea to expedite the delivery of ammunition and reassure Pyongyang that more substantial aid would follow. This strategy might have also been intended to signal to Western observers that technological aid to North Korea was a real possibility. Space technology was likely natural choice for bargaining due to highly publicized Russian expertise, making it both a marketable offer and a strategically benign option, as a satellite in space, especially malfunctioning, would not significantly enhance North Korea's military capabilities.

At the moment, there is no firm indication that the Kremlin might be actually preparing to provide North Korea with cutting-edge technology or could do so in the future. This trend, however, may change if the international situation continues to deteriorate. In many aspects, Moscow's decision-making will be determined by the extent of South Korea's military assistance to Ukraine and the dynamics of

China's relations with the United States.

⁸¹ Chae Yun-hwan. 2024. "Large number of Russian experts enter North Korea to help spy satellite launch efforts." *Yonhap News*. May 26. <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20240526000500315>

⁸² Lee Hyo-jin. 2024. "North Korea's second spy satellite launch fails despite Russia's alleged support". *The Korea Times*. May 29. https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2024/07/103_375500.html

⁸³ Gerden, Eugene. 2024. Tough Times for Russian Navigation System. *GPS World*. February 29. <https://www.gpsworld.com/tough-times-for-russian-navigation-system/>

⁸⁴ Wall, Mike. 2015. Russian Proton Rocket Fails During Satellite Launch. *Space*. May 19. <https://www.space.com/29432-russia-proton-rocket-launch-failure.html>

⁸⁵ PBS News. 2023. Russia's lunar mission failure raises questions about state of space program. *PBS News*. August 22. <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/russias-lunar-mission-failure-raises-questions-about-state-of-space-program>

⁸⁶ EFE. 2024. Russia launches Angara-A5 heavy rocket after third try. *EFE*. April 11. <https://efe.com/en/science-and-technology/2024-04-11/russia-launches-angara-a5-heavy-rocket-after-third-try/>

⁸⁷ Gerden, Eugene. 2024. Tough Times for Russian Navigation System. *GPS World*. February 29. <https://www.gpsworld.com/tough-times-for-russian-navigation-system/>

V. Way Ahead

Despite numerous unknown variables, there are several developments in Russia-North Korea relations that can be forecasted with a reasonable degree of certainty, based on historical patterns and current events. The following presents possible scenarios for both the duration and aftermath of the war in Ukraine.

(i) Reciprocal escalation and possible transfer of conventional weapons

(Most likely short-term scenario)

Up until the end of the illegal war against Ukraine, the cooperation between Russia and North Korea is likely to deepen. While the transfer of advanced technology remains improbable during this period, as Moscow would prefer to retain this option for, the prospect for assistance in non-nuclear military domains emerges as increasingly plausible. The scale and nature of this aid are likely to be determined, or rather mirrored, by the extent of support provided to Ukraine by South Korea and the United States. Should Seoul opt to supply arms directly to Kyiv, or if Washington decides to increase its provision of lethal weaponry, such actions are likely to be met with significant repercussions on the part of the Kremlin. Retaliatory measures could potentially include the transfer of conventional weapons, particularly for aviation.

North Korea might possess a powerful nuclear deterrent, but its armed forces are in a deep state of deterioration due to years of neglect and lack of modernization efforts. This backwardness deprives Pyongyang of freedom of maneuver on the escalation ladder. Should North Korea launch a nuclear attack, it would be ill-equipped to withstand the ensuing massive retaliatory strike from the vastly superior conventional forces of the United States, South Korea, and Japan. This major vulnerability, however, could be significantly mitigated if Russia were to assist Pyongyang in revitalization of its air fleet, for instance, in response to the transfer of F-16 fighters to Ukraine. Such an upgrade could potentially alter the security landscape on the Korean peninsula, as it would deprive South Korea of its current advantage in the air.⁸⁸ In response, Seoul would likely be compelled to enhance its air defenses, potentially expanding its THAAD system, which could further escalate the ongoing arms race.

Recognizing that its current window of opportunity may soon close, as the war against Ukraine cannot continue indefinitely, North Korea might push for increased compensation for its assistance, seeking to secure not only fighter jets but also armored vehicles and surface-to-air missiles from Moscow. The success of North Korea in pressuring Russia for more concessions is likely to be

determined by the broader international dynamics, particularly the relations between the US and China and the overall level of global tensions.

(ii) Post-War Arrangements

There are two developments that could potentially unfold between Moscow and Pyongyang following the conclusion of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine. Should there be a rapprochement between the Kremlin and the West—a scenario that Moscow would presumably favor the most, as it could pave the way for the easing of its economic and political isolation—cooperation with North Korea would likely revert to its typical low-key status. This shift would be driven by the necessity for Russia to comply with Western sanctions against North Korea, thereby complicating any significant bilateral engagement with Pyongyang.

If, however, the resolution of the war against Ukraine were to deepen the estrangement between the Kremlin and the West, Russia would likely intensify its efforts to strengthen ties with North Korea, aiming to further undermine the existing international order by facilitating destabilization, this time in the Indo-Pacific.

⁸⁸ Military Watch Magazine. 2020. North Korean MiG-23 vs. South Korean F-16: Which Single Engine Jet Would Dominate in a New Korean War? *Military Watch Magazine*. December 22. <https://militarywatchmagazine.com/article/north-korean-mig-23-vs-south-korean-f-16-which-single-engine-jet-would-dominate-in-a-new-korean-war>

VI. Policy Recommendations

To weaken the expanding relationship between Moscow and Pyongyang and reduce the probability of the aforementioned scenarios unfolding, the EU may need to adopt a multifaceted approach, involving diplomatic re-engagement, strengthened multilateral cooperation, and a careful balancing of relations with key global and regional players.

(i) Collaborate with partners in the Indo-Pacific:

Strengthen partnerships with like-minded nations: The EU must ensure that Russia cooperation with North Korea does not undermine the solidarity of Japan and South Korea with Ukraine. To achieve this, the EU should focus on strengthening partnerships with these nations. This collaboration should emphasize shared security interests, economic cooperation, and technological advancements.

Create resilience against Russian retaliation measures: The EU and its partners must be prepared for further provocations from Russia and North Korea. Cooperation should aim to minimize economic and military vulnerabilities, enabling them to withstand Russian pressure and blackmail efforts.

(ii) Engage the Global South to build broader consensus:

Diplomatic outreach: The EU should engage in more robust diplomatic efforts with key Global South countries to gain their support in pressuring Russia. This includes initiating dialogues that highlight the global security implications of Russia's actions and the importance of a united international stance.

Economic incentives: To encourage Global South countries to reduce their economic ties with Russia, the EU should offer substantial economic incentives, such as trade agreements, investment in infrastructure, and development aid. These measures can help offset any economic losses these countries might incur by aligning with Western sanctions.

Public diplomacy: The EU should enhance its public diplomacy efforts to shape public opinion in the Global South. This can involve campaigns that emphasize the benefits of a united international response to Russia's actions and the long-term advantages of cooperation with the EU and its allies.

(iii) Adapt sanctions strategy to limit Russian access to alternative financial resources and advanced semiconductor technologies:

Targeted sanctions on Russian revenue sources: The EU should refine its sanctions strategy to specifically target financial inflows to Russia, particularly those funding its military activities and arms deals with North Korea. This may involve closer monitoring of trade routes and financial transactions, as well as working with international partners to close any loopholes.

Targeted sanction on companies involved in the re-export of semiconductors to Russia: The EU should seek to limit Russian access to semiconductors by tightening export controls, enhancing supply chain monitoring, and imposing stricter sanctions on intermediary countries, such as China, suspected of facilitating the re-export of high-tech components. This approach could not only undermine Russia's military-industrial complex, which heavily depends on Western high-tech chips, but also severely impact its space industry, significantly reducing the operability of Russian missiles.

Coordinate with global allies: Ensuring that sanctions are enforced uniformly across allied nations is crucial. The EU should work closely with the United States and other partners to harmonize sanctions policies, making it more difficult for Russia to find alternative markets or financial resources. Coordinating with global partners to block indirect routes and targeting companies involved in the re-export of semiconductors could further restrict Russia's access to advanced technologies.

(iv) Prepare for Long-Term Strategic Engagement:

Rebuild diplomatic presence in North Korea: The EU should be prepared to re-establish its diplomatic presence in Pyongyang as soon as feasible. This would enhance the EU's ability to gather information, engage directly with North Korean officials, and influence the regime's actions through diplomacy.

Develop contingency plans: Given the unpredictable nature of North Korea's foreign policy, the EU should develop contingency plans that account for various scenarios, including the possibility of a prolonged absence of Western diplomatic presence in Pyongyang. These plans should include alternative methods of gathering intelligence and influencing North Korean policy, such as through regional partners or multilateral institutions.

(v) Strengthen internal cohesion within the EU:

Enhance diplomatic coordination: The EU must prioritize stronger internal unity by fostering better coordination among member states, particularly in crafting and implementing sanctions against Russia. This involves addressing the divergent approaches within the EU, such as the differences between Eastern European and Western European nations, to present a unified front.

Combat internal interference: The EU should implement measures to counteract the influence of Kremlin agents within its borders. This may include bolstering cybersecurity, strengthening counterintelligence efforts, and enhancing cooperation among EU member states to mitigate the effects of Russian disinformation campaigns and political manipulation.

About the Author



Olena Guseinova is currently a lecturer at the Graduate School of International and Area Studies, HUFS, Korea. Concurrently, she holds the position of a Non-resident Vasey Fellow at Pacific Forum and a Research Assistant for the Journal Comparative Connections. Ms. Guseinova earned a bachelor's degree in international relations from Kyiv International University, a master's degree in security studies from Sogang University, and a doctoral degree in international relations from Hankuk University of Foreign Studies. Her particular areas of interest include survival of buffer states, behavioral patterns of rival great powers, evolution and change of regional orders, North Korea and inter-Korean relations. Her current research focuses on the security problems of small and medium-sized states entrapped in the geopolitical competition of much more powerful regional and international players.

