

OPINION

North Korea Plans to Trade Soldiers for Russian Military Tech—But the Alliance Is Fragile

The North Korean leader would sacrifice his soldiers' lives in exchange for Russia's advanced military technology.

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Russia's President Vladimir Putin and North Korea's leader Kim Jong Un (center right) visit the Vostochny Cosmodrome in Amur region on Sept. 13, 2023. Mikhail Metzel/POOL/AFP via Getty Images



Commentary

Russia's setbacks in Ukraine have given North Korea the satisfaction of feeling needed and opportunities to exchange weapons for Russian food and advanced military technology, including missiles and nuclear capabilities.

For the technology he craves, North Korean leader Kim Jong-un will likely send his troops to serve as cannon fodder on the Ukrainian battlefield in exchange.



In other words, Kim wants to trade his soldiers' lives as goods.



On Russian President Vladimir Putin's 72nd birthday on Oct. 7, Kim sent a message, calling him the "closest comrade." On the same day, Kim also announced that the relations between the two countries



could be elevated to a new level.



In June this year, Putin and Kim [signed a defense pact](#) pledging mutual assistance in the event of aggression against either nation.

On Oct. 8, South Korean Defense Minister Kim Yong-kyun told lawmakers that it is "highly likely" that North Korea is deploying regular troops to Ukraine to support Russia's invasion. This move is a step in fulfilling North Korea's military agreement with Russia.

Russia needs experienced ground combat personnel, a demand that North Korea can fulfill. The North Korean military has [1.32 million active personnel](#), making it the fourth largest military in the world.

North Koreans were identified among the dead after a Ukrainian missile strike on Russian-occupied territory near Donetsk earlier this month, South Korean and Ukrainian officials said.

If North Korean troops are sent into battle en masse, they are likely to serve as cannon fodder for Russian forces, reminiscent of the role of

the Wagner Group a year ago.

North Korea's supply of weapons and ammunition to Russia is easier to track. U.S. and South Korean officials [have reported](#) that North Korea has shipped thousands of containers of military equipment to support Russia's war effort.

Munitions supplied by North Korea are "really bad for us, and so far, there's nothing we can do about that," Ukrainian military intelligence chief [Kyrylo Budanov](#) said at the Yalta European Security Conference held in Kyiv in mid-September. "The worst problem we are facing is the one coming from North Korea."

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During Kim's visit to Russia last September, Putin promised to help North Korea develop satellites.

On Oct. 8, a South Korean lawmaker said that Seoul's military had detected signs that North Korea could be building its [first nuclear-powered submarine](#). However, whether this submarine will have second-strike capabilities or be equipped to carry cruise missiles and torpedoes remains unclear.

The Russia–North Korea alliance is likely to push the war in Ukraine in a direction contrary to U.S. and Western interests, a scenario the Chinese regime may welcome as it could drain Western resources and shift focus away from the Asia-Pacific region.

However, this relationship is sustained mainly by the ongoing conflict in Ukraine. Once the war ends, the alliance could quickly wither. Russia may diminish its engagement with North Korea as Moscow seeks to regain access to the global financial market.

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