

North Korea in Europe: Crossroads of Conflict

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On October 28, NATO [confirmed](#) that North Korean troops have been deployed to Kursk, the Russian region that is partly controlled by Ukraine. This deepening military cooperation between Russia and North Korea raises the stakes, threatening to escalate tensions on the Korean Peninsula while also complicating the already precarious battlefield conditions in Europe.

In light of these developments, and considering growing concerns about China's relationship with Russia, European policymakers are increasingly recognizing the interconnected nature of security dynamics across both regions. This realization is prompting a reevaluation of countermeasures, as they seek to address the immediate and potential challenges posed by the evolving strategic alignment between Russia and North Korea.

The Slow Unraveling of the EU's "Critical Engagement" Approach to North Korea

The European Union's (EU) approach to the Korean Peninsula was [outlined](#) in European Council Conclusions from October 9 and November 20, 2001, and further shaped by EU institutions, culminating the [DPRK Country Strategy Paper](#) in February 2002. This initial framework marked a peak in engagement, after which EU-DPRK relations began a slow and troubling decline.

As a result, the EU approach to North Korea has evolved from engagement to a robust policy of critical engagement, primarily focused on sanctions and international pressure. North Korea's alarming support for Russia's war in Ukraine has further strained EU-DPRK relations, compelling the EU to urgently reassess its strategies, with potential increases in military and economic support for Ukraine and a concerted effort to fortify alliances in the Indo-Pacific.

Coordination among EU member states on North Korea began as early as the late 1990s, initially spurred by the nuclear and humanitarian crises emerging in the region. Since the late 2000s, Brussels has firmly pursued a policy of “[critical engagement](#)” towards North Korea, combining sanctions, humanitarian aid, and dialogue as part of its official approach. Nonetheless, North Korea’s relentless nuclear ambitions and persistent human rights abuses have continued unabated, raising urgent concerns for global security.

From the mid-1990s until 2003, Brussels favored unconditional engagement with North Korea, prioritizing dialogue to avoid conflict. The overarching goal was to assist Pyongyang in developing a sustainable economy while alleviating the humanitarian crisis. Member States opened their markets to North Korean exports and offered technical support, fostering high expectations for cooperation and mutual benefit.

However, between 2003 and 2023, the EU [shifted](#) to a non-engagement policy, prompted by the need to solidify a common foreign and security policy (CFSP) and respond decisively to nuclear proliferation. Brussels committed to responding firmly to potential proliferators, aligning with the US on global security issues in a concerted effort to counteract threats. As North Korea intensified its nuclear activities, the EU increasingly condemned Pyongyang’s provocations, though it often refrained from taking independent measures

Over the years, EU policy toward North Korea has shifted from engagement to a focus on sanctions, particularly following North Korea’s withdrawal from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in 2003 and its first nuclear test in 2006. The EU has implemented comprehensive sanctions covering arms, fuel, metals, luxury goods, and financial transactions, while also leading international efforts at the UN to address North Korea’s human rights violations. By the time of Kim Jong Il’s death in December 2011, this pivot marked a [significant change](#) in EU priorities.

Reflecting a strategy of sustained pressure, the EU has progressively minimized its political engagement with North Korea, culminating in the suspension of the Political Dialogue in 2015. In March 2021, the EU implemented its first sanctions on North Korea specifically targeting human rights abuses, further solidifying its already robust sanctions regime and demonstrating its commitment to uphold international human rights standards. The US echoed this sanctions-based approach in December 2021 with its [first sanctions on North Korea under the Biden administration](#), underscoring an ongoing commitment to this strategy, underscoring a united front among Western nations in their response to North Korean provocations.

While the EU’s approach to North Korea grew increasingly restrictive, individual EU member states and academic institutions across Europe played a crucial role in maintaining communication channels with North Korea, particularly in the absence of official dialogues.

However, with North Korea's stringent lockdown measures following the Covid-19 outbreak, these European-led Track 1.5 dialogues [ceased](#), closing off a key avenue for engagement and further isolating the regime. The four European NGOs that previously operated in the country have [withdrawn](#), and European humanitarian aid has sharply declined. In February, a German delegation made [the first to visit](#) Pyongyang since its embassy was shuttered during the pandemic, marking a potential turning point as other European countries prepared for an anticipated return.

Russia and North Korea: A Deepening Military Partnership

The rising demands on Russia to sustain its war efforts in Ukraine have forged new paths for cooperation with North Korea. Growing military ties between Russia and North Korea have altered Europe's mindset about the type and intensity of the threat from North Korea, reinforcing the notion that the security dynamics of the Euro-Atlantic and Asia-Pacific regions are indivisible.

US intelligence [first raised concerns](#) in September 2022, reporting that Russia had begun purchasing "millions" of rockets and artillery shells from Pyongyang to support its invasion. By November, US National Security Spokesperson John Kirby [revealed](#) that North Korea was "covertly shipping a significant number of artillery shells" to Russia. According to US Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Robert Koepcke, North Korea has [shipped](#) over 16,500 containers of munitions and related materiel since September last year. On October 24, the Russian Duma [ratified](#) a strategic partnership with North Korea — a development that coincided with reports of North Korean troops arriving in Russia alongside a shipment of 2,000 additional containers of military supplies.

North Korea's military collaboration with Russia should be viewed — together with the revision of its constitution to label the South a "hostile" state, adoption of a new national anthem, and destruction of infrastructure that previously connected the two nations — as evidence of Kim Jong Un's drive to cement North Korea's separation from the South.

Consequently, North Korean troops in Russia represent a troubling new development in the Ukraine war. Their involvement in helping Russia regain control of Kursk would free up Russian forces to concentrate on their advances in eastern Ukraine. Furthermore, North Korea's active involvement indicates that Putin has no intentions of making concessions for the sake of peace.

There is a possibility that North Korea, [in exchange](#) for their troops' deployment, would ask for cutting-edge technology in the areas of tactical nuclear weapons, ICBMs, reconnaissance satellites, and missile submarines. A key mutual benefit of their partnership could be the coordinated evasion of sanctions, as both Russia's and North Korea's arms industries rely on

external resources like semiconductors. By aligning their smuggling operations, both stand to gain.

North Korea's military collaboration with Russia, coupled with the revision of its constitution to designate South Korea as a “hostile” state, the adoption of a new national anthem, and the destruction of connecting infrastructure, underscores Kim Jong Un’s intent to further isolate the North from the South. With its growing military capabilities and perceived support from Russia, North Korea may adopt an even more aggressive stance.

Europe Reacts: Assessing and Addressing the Threat

So, how has Europe responded thus far, and what might be the broader implications of these unfolding events? To that end, NATO Secretary-General Mark Rutte [emphasized](#) the gravity of the situation, stating “The deepening military alliance between Russia and North Korea threatens the security of both the Indo-Pacific and Euro-Atlantic regions,” adding, “It jeopardizes peace on the Korean Peninsula and contributes to the ongoing Russian war against Ukraine.” The EU High Representative’s [official statement](#) referred to the North Korean troop deployment not only as “a flagrant violation of the UN Charter and of multiple UN Security Council resolutions” but as “a unilateral hostile act by the DPRK with serious consequences for European and global peace and security.”

In this context, speaking at the IISS Shangri-La Dialogue in June, the EU’s High Representative for Foreign Affairs [acknowledged](#) that “the security of Europe and that of the Indo-Pacific are increasingly interlinked” — a statement he [repeated almost verbatim](#) in response to reports of the deployment of North Korean troops. This sentiment was [underscored](#) by UK Defense Secretary John Healey, highlighting a growing consensus among European leaders.

Reports that thousands of North Korean soldiers [may soon join Russian forces in Ukraine](#) renewed discussions about the potential deployment of Western troops to support Ukraine. In particular, Lithuanian Foreign Minister Gabrielius Landsbergis made a bold call for a reassessment of defense strategies, [urging](#) European leaders to reconsider French President Emmanuel Macron’s previous [refusal to rule out](#) the possibility of dispatching Western troops as trainers to Ukraine and along the Belarussian border. Riho Terhas, a conservative Estonian member of the European Parliament and a former general, [echoed](#) this sentiment, emphasizing the urgency of proactive measures.

Notably, the expected deployment of North Korean troops to Ukraine coincided with EU High Commissioner for Foreign Policy Josep Borrell’s [visit](#) to Tokyo, the initial stop on an East Asia tour that also included a visit to Seoul. In a pivotal moment, Japan and the EU [launched](#) a new security and defense partnership aimed at strengthening military ties, which will include joint exercises and collaboration between their defense industries. This highlights the EU’s growing

engagement in the Indo-Pacific region, particularly as China and Russia enhance their military cooperation and North Korea sends troops to support Russia. The EU-Japan security partnership, as indicated in the [joint statement](#), signifies that Europe and the Indo-Pacific are “highly interconnected and interdependent,” reinforcing the need for unified responses to emerging threats.

Meanwhile, in a phone call with South Korean President Yoon, Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission, [vowed](#) that Europe’s response to response to North Korea’s troop deployment in support of Russia will be centered on cooperation with South Korea and other like-minded allies. During the call, the two leaders also discussed progress in the development of the [Security and Defense Partnership](#) announced at the EU-Korea Summit in May 2023 in Seoul.

Indeed, South Korea’s strategic importance to Europe has surged, a trend likely accelerated by recent Russia-North Korea military cooperation. Since taking office in 2022, President Yoon Seok-yeol has aimed to elevate South Korea's global standing, and security ties with the EU and NATO have strengthened considerably. South Korea has also become a major supplier of European arms, notably securing a record [\\$14 billion deal](#) with Poland in 2022. Plans for expanded maritime cooperation are underway, with a South Korean firm [bidding](#) to build four submarines for Poland, and smaller deals have been signed with Estonia, Finland, Norway, and Romania, illustrating the breadth of this strategic partnership.

In response to reports of North Korean troop support for Russia, South Korean President Yoon [raised the possibility](#) of sending lethal aid to Ukraine. During his summit with Polish President Andrzej Duda, Yoon [pledged](#) to “actively support” further deliveries of South Korean military equipment to Poland, including a new agreement for K-2 tanks, which both governments hope to conclude with the year. Thus, the roles of both North and South Korea in European security are becoming more strategically significant. This trend demonstrates a growing connection between the strategic arenas of Europe and Asia, as Asian countries increasingly look to shape the European security environment.

Though some European officials have cast North Korean involvement in the Ukraine war as an “unimaginable provocation” to which NATO must respond, it is not clear how, much less when the Alliance and/or the European Union will. The options are few, while the fear of escalation remains a rare point of unity among Western countries. Though the EU and NATO have firmly denounced North Korea's deployment of forces on Russia’s side, UN sanctions on Pyongyang are already extensive, leaving few avenues for further action.

To be sure, Europe cannot stop North Korea from cooperating with Russia. But Brussels could incentivize third countries, banks, and companies involved — knowingly or unknowingly — in

North Korea's money laundering and arms procurement. The EU can also leverage existing dialogues with Indo-Pacific nations on non-proliferation and provide stronger incentives to disrupt North Korea's arms trade through enhancing maritime domain awareness and [intercepting suspicious vessels](#) in international waters.

Conclusion

The recent escalation of military cooperation between Russia and North Korea not only poses an immediate threat to Ukraine but also risks intensifying global tensions and fatigue over Western support for Ukraine. This partnership complicates the security landscape, with potential repercussions for US-European relations and the broader Indo-Pacific region.

While the deepening ties between Russia and North Korea may create friction in China's relationships with both Seoul and Tokyo, it is unlikely to weaken Beijing's strategic alignment with Moscow. Instead, these developments are likely to further entrench Europe's role in East Asian security dynamics, bolstering the trilateral military coalition among Japan, South Korea, and the United States against shared threats.

Moreover, the Ukraine conflict has accelerated the decline of China's standing in Europe, as many European nations perceive Beijing's silence on North Korea's troop support for Russia as tacit endorsement of aggression. This dynamic could lead to a tighter strategic convergence between the US and Europe, driven by a shared commitment to countering threats from both Russia and North Korea.

In this shifting geopolitical environment, it is imperative for Europe to reevaluate its strategies toward North Korea, seeking to disrupt its military ambitions while fostering a united front with allies in addressing the multifaceted challenges posed by both Pyongyang and Moscow.