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North Korea's Ukraine War Involvement Signals Escalating Cooperation Among U.S. Adversaries

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- North Korea's deployment of combat forces to Kursk starting in late 2024 in support of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, along with its transfers of artillery shells, missiles, and dual-use systems, reflects a potentially dangerous and emerging new dimension of CRINK military cooperation.
- Pyongyang's participation offers its forces valuable battlefield experience while bolstering Russia's manpower and signaling strategic alignment.
- The nature of North Korea's involvement raises broader questions about the future of multitheater conflict, alliance durability, and the evolving contours of CRINK's military support networks.
- The presence of foreign troops in Russia demonstrates how CRINK members may converge asymmetrically around shared strategic aims while pursuing divergent operational goals.

CRINK Alliance Project

This periodic report assesses the contours of the emerging alliance of the United States' four primary adversaries: China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea (CRINK). Based on open-source research, this 'CRINK Alliance Project' offers analysis of how this axis is disrupting or reshaping the Operational Environment. Its purpose is to help military leaders and policymakers discern whether, how, and when these countries' interests align and diverge; anticipate potential friction points; and seize opportunities to counter their joint efforts to threaten the United States and its interests.

INTRODUCTION

In 2024, North Korea became the first country since World War I to deploy combat troops to fight on Russian territory. The UN Multilateral Sanctions Monitoring team estimates that Pyongyang provided at least 11,000 Korean People's Army (KPA) soldiers—including large numbers of special forces personnel—over 100 ballistic missiles, and nearly 9 million rounds of artillery and rocket ammunition to Russia in late 2024 with an additional 3,000 troops deployed in early 2025.^{1,2} They were sent to



support Russian operations in Kursk, bolstering manpower shortages, signaling deepening ties between Pyongyang and Moscow, and helping Russian forces retake the oblast (province) in response to a surprise Ukrainian offensive in Russian territory.³ Kursk is both strategically and symbolically important for Moscow: it is the western-most province bordering Ukraine's Suma region as well as the location of the pivotal World War II Battle of Kursk against the Nazis, which marked a major turning point in the war. The direct involvement of another CRINK member in Russia's "special military operation" in Ukraine raises the likelihood of greater CRINK collaboration in future conflicts. The presence of North Korean troops in Russia also complicates assumptions about Pyongyang's global military posture. This marks a strategic shift in how the United States must view and plan for future adversarial coordination. This paper analyzes the wider implications for the U.S. Army, evaluating the future of CRINK military cooperation and capabilities.

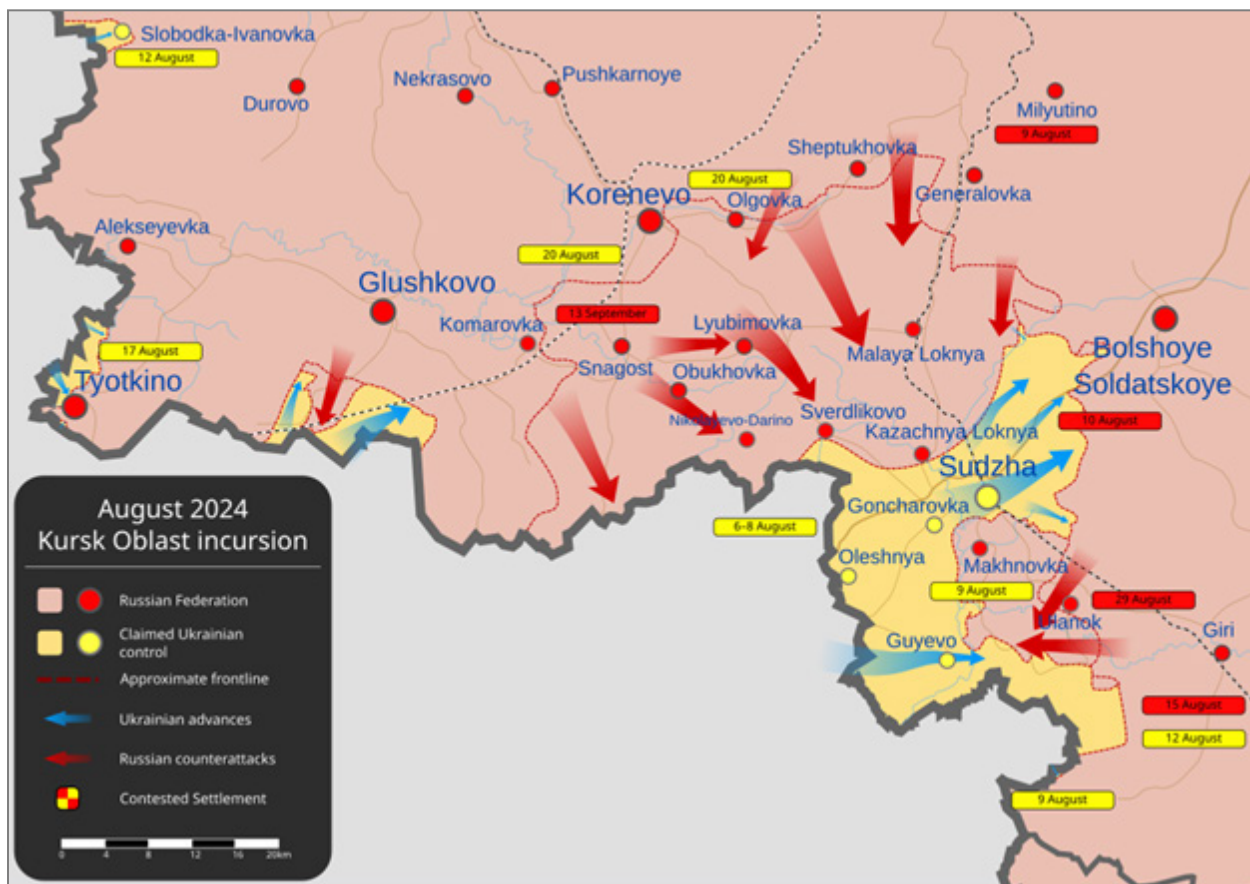


Figure 1: Map of August 2024 Incursion Into Kursk Province
(Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:August_2024_Kursk_Oblast_incursion.svg)
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North Korea: A Signal of Solidarity With the Benefit of Battlefield Experience

The presence of North Korean soldiers fighting alongside their Russian counterparts was meant to show the robustness of the strategic partnership between Pyongyang and Moscow. In addition, the deployment provided North Korean troops with valuable training in modern war. The soldiers reportedly arrived in Kursk via sea and rail corridors between eastern North Korea and the Russian Far East in late October 2024 as part of a counteroffensive after Ukrainian forces opened the Kursk salient in August. Russian forces likely coordinated their transport due to Pyongyang's outdated and insufficient logistics capabilities.^{4, 5} North Korean troops equipped with Russian gear were initially used in rear-area and logistics roles during the early fall, before rotating to front-line positions in Kursk around November.⁶

North Korea's initial reticence regarding its military involvement in Ukraine has given way to open embrace and strategic justification, demonstrating a deepening alignment with Russia despite battlefield costs.^{7, 8} Kim has framed the deployment as a defense of Russian territorial integrity, which he portrays as linked to North Korea's own security. This framing is based on the shared threat posed by a strong United States and Kim's contention that a defeated Ukraine was a necessary signal to South Korea.⁹ As of 30 April 2025, South Korea's National Intelligence Service estimated that North Korea's military had suffered a total of 4,700 casualties.¹⁰ However, politically, Kim's regime faces few domestic constraints in its support of Russia, given that there are no obvious alternative centers of power within the regime.

Fundamental limitations within the North Korean military and practical challenges to integration suggest its deployment to Ukraine is driven more by Pyongyang's political and economic interests than by a critical Russian need for combat support. The troubles that plague the North Korean military, which is rigid, underfunded, and poorly trained, will not immediately be reversed by the lessons it learned fighting alongside its Russian counterpart. Moreover, translating Russian techniques, tactics, and procedures to the Korean Peninsula will be difficult. All these factors suggest that North Korean troops are deployed more for propaganda or profit than out of a genuine Russian need for additional manpower.



Figure 2: President Kim Jong Un and President Vladimir Putin met on 25 April 2019 at the North Korea–Russia summit in Vladivostok. (Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Kim_Jong-un_and_Vladimir_Putin_%282019-04-25%29_05.jpg; Attribution: Creative Commons Attribution 4.0)

Russia: Welcoming the Small but Beneficial Contribution

For Moscow, the addition of North Korean forces serves its political goals domestically, allowing Russia to avoid the political costs of a larger domestic military mobilization while simultaneously broadcasting that it is not diplomatically isolated. However, the size of the North Korean contingent—an estimated 11,000 soldiers—accounts for a little over one week’s worth of losses for Russia, casting doubt on their ability to tangibly reshape battlefield lines.¹¹ Additionally the KPA’s role was carefully managed—most North Korean soldiers underwent preliminary training at Russian ranges and were introduced to combat gradually, with initial roles limited to logistics and rear-area defense.¹² Despite concerns that the KPA might be used as expendable manpower, available evidence suggests the North Korean contingent operated largely in independent sectors to avoid friction with Russian units and reduce logistical and translation burdens.¹³ They also remained inside Russia’s pre-2022 borders—likely a deliberate choice to mitigate propaganda risks and international escalation. Reports have claimed that North Korea may continue rotating units through Russia’s conflict zones, including construction workers and deminers, to enhance its conventional capabilities, rebuild its damaged infrastructure, and refine its missile development programs.¹⁴

Russian assessments portray the KPA as a surprisingly capable and valuable asset in the conflict, demonstrating a commitment exceeding that of other Russian partners. “This was a live-fire lab,” said analyst Oleg Glazunov. “Their special forces are among the best in the world, but they haven’t seen real combat since the 1950s. Now they’ve faced drones, modern artillery, and a new kind of battlefield.”¹⁵ Others praised the Korean soldiers for “their coordination, discipline, a fatalist disregard for death, and remarkable endurance,” while noting that North Korea supplied combat forces even as other Russian allies like Belarus have not.^{16, 17}

China: A Silent Supporter Keeping its Distance on the North Korean Question

China’s involvement in Russia’s war in Ukraine has so far been limited to public expressions of solidarity, aiding the circumvention of Western sanctions—including the shipment of dual-use technologies to Russia, which Beijing frequently denies—and support for global distribution of Russian oil and natural gas. Regarding lethal aid, Beijing officially denies sending weapons to Russia, and evidence of Chinese lethal aid to Russia has been spotty at best, despite recent reports of Chinese laser weapons being used on the battlefield.^{18, 19} Chinese nationals have reportedly joined Russian forces, though China discourages its citizens from fighting in foreign wars. It is more likely that given the pro-Russia stance Beijing has taken, a small number of citizens may have been encouraged to support Russia, just as a small number of U.S. and European citizens have unofficially joined the Ukrainian armed forces. Factors like significant young adult unemployment in China and no viable job prospects, in addition to lucrative recruiting bonuses by Russia and promises of being in reserve positions rather than the front lines, may be driving the small number of Chinese citizens showing up on the frontlines.²⁰

There is no evidence that China has assisted with the movement of North Korean forces or equipment into Russia.²¹ Despite sharing strategic goals with Moscow and Pyongyang, Beijing appears to prefer bilateral partnerships and maintains a cautious distance from formal multilateral military commitments.

China benefits from a Russia with a weakened military and economic position, as it seeks greater dominance and influence over its longstanding rival and northern neighbor. Its ambivalence toward the war underscores the asymmetries within the CRINK axis, where China often acts as a self-interested power rather than a committed coalition partner.

Iran: Ambivalent on North Koreans in Ukraine, but Supportive of Russia Despite Distrust

Iran has maintained a largely neutral stance regarding North Korea's military involvement in Ukraine, likely driven by concern over potential economic competition. It is plausible that some Iranian officials view Pyongyang's growing footprint in the war as competition in the realm of munitions sales, an important form of revenue for Tehran as it endures the renewed maximum pressure campaign of sanctions. There is no evidence to suggest any Iranian involvement in the North Korean troop transfers or their support once in-country.

Despite a historically complex and often distrustful relationship, Iran has significantly deepened its strategic partnership with Russia, particularly since the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, driven by shared geopolitical interests and economic opportunity. The Anglo-Soviet invasion of Iran during World War II reinforced this narrative, and mutual distrust between Tehran and Moscow lingers even to this day. Despite these tensions and misaligned interests, they collaborated in Syria, where Iran called on Russia in 2015 to provide air support for the al-Assad regime. After the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, Moscow became Iran's fifth-largest trading partner and largest investor in the country. They also developed stronger defense ties, with thousands of Iran-manufactured drones—the Mohajer and Shahed—and ballistic missiles, such as the Fath-360, transferred to Russia for use in Ukraine.²² Tehran also reportedly began building a drone factory in Russia in 2023. These defense ties were formalized in January 2025, after both nations signed the much-anticipated twenty-year Comprehensive Strategic Partnership treaty.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE U.S. ARMY

The deployment of North Korean personnel to support Russian operations, underscores a deepening strategic alignment between the CRINK nations and signals a potential precedent for unconventional force deployments by adversarial actors. This highlights a shared objective of challenging U.S. influence globally. Raising several implications for the U.S. Army.

- The deployment of North Korean soldiers to fight alongside their Russian counterparts signals the robustness of the two countries' growing strategic partnership and potential of future similar unconventional deployments of forces by adversaries.
- CRINK states may not form a formal alliance, but their wartime collaboration demonstrates a shared interest in undermining U.S. influence.
- Stronger defense ties between Moscow and Tehran, especially involving Iran-manufactured drones, since the outbreak of war in February 2022, could be a sign of deeper collaboration in the future.
- Variability in CRINK cooperation, as seen in China's limited involvement or Iran's official neutrality, offers opportunities to exploit fractures or frictions.

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