

Russia and North Korea – Rogues of the world, unite!

Kristian L. Nielsen

The presence of North Korean troops at the frontline in Ukraine signals both the escalation and possible spread of Russia's aggressive war



Picture credit: Reuters

Almost 23 years after George W. Bush declared North Korea, Iran and Iraq an 'Axis of Evil', the first two are still standing in opposition to the US, while the third has long been under heavy Iranian influence. Some now argue that we are witnessing the emergence of a [new axis of four](#), with Russia and China joining the two original members. Today, Russia's war in Ukraine is the major fault line.

China's support for Russia is [well known](#) and a sore point between it and the NATO members. China mainly supplies dual use goods and its purchases of Russian energy exports has helped keep the economy afloat (see my commentaries 13 May and 17 July 2024). This relationship has been growing for a long time, and looks set to [grow closer still](#).

As for the original axis members, it is noteworthy how willing Russia has become to enlist the support of states that are about as rogue as rogue gets. Yet they have proven their usefulness. [Iran has supplied](#) many of the missiles and drones that attack Ukrainian cities and critical infrastructure. North Korea started supplying Russia with [artillery shells](#) in the early spring of this year. The cosiness with Iran and North Korea shows that Russia does not intend to make nice with the West anytime soon on any terms other than its own.

The recent [arrival of North Korean troops](#) at the front in Ukraine, however, dials the support all the way up to eleven. Vladimir Putin has [repeatedly warned](#) Western powers against putting 'boots on the ground' to help Ukraine, saying it could lead to a world war. Now he has himself crossed that line. The new development also has implications far beyond Ukraine, potentially upsetting the fragile stability in East Asia. It also poses difficult questions for a Chinese leadership that has so far sought to tread a fine line between supporting Russia's war and not completely breaking off relations with the West.

The 'Axis of Rogues'

Russia's partnership with North Korea really took off this past spring. With [Russia's domestic economy](#) feeling the strain of economic sanctions, and military expenditure slowly but steadily exhausting its fiscal reserves while crowding out investments in other domestic spheres, and China still not supplying it with military aid, Russia had to look elsewhere. Since the start of the war, North Korean leader Kim Jong Un has made two visits to Russia, and in June this year, Putin visited for the first time in 24 years. The two leaders signed a [security pact](#), pledging to support each other in case of armed attacks.

According to [NATO estimates](#), North Korea has supplied more than 2 million artillery shells – South Korea puts the number [closer to five million](#) – thereby playing no small part in sustaining the intensity of Russian warfare at a time when its domestic production is struggling to keep up. What Russia gives in return causes even greater concern. Apart from

food supplies, North Korea may also have received [high-tech military expertise](#) and help for its nuclear programme. For the United States, the [nightmare scenario](#) of a North Korea capable of hitting on the US mainland is fast becoming a reality.

Now, North Korea is supporting Russia with troops. According to various estimates, some [10.000-12.000](#) North Korean troops may already be in Russia. Questions naturally abound as to the combat-readiness of the North Korean troops. Their country has not, after all, fought a war since 1953, and nobody knows the true state of military training. Striking partnerships with new allies also presents problems of their own. Russian forces have little experience in sharing a battlefield with allies, and questions of how to share equipment and ammo, as well as overcoming language barriers, cause friction. Moreover, the casual racism so common in Russian society shows here too, some Russian officers apparently referring to their new allies as [“the f***ing Chinese.”](#)

Wider implications still?

Some argue that North Korea's commitment of troops is in itself escalatory behaviour vis-à-vis South Korea. Kim Jong Un already formally [abandoned the official policy of reunification](#) with the South in October. There have been various [tit-for-tat provocations](#) along the border between the two Koreas over the past six months. South Korea, which has until now been cautious regarding the Ukraine war may decide to come off the fence.

So far, South Korea has [not supplied munitions directly to Ukraine](#), only to other allies, who, in turn, have supplied Ukraine from their stocks. That at least provided a wafer-thin pretence of neutrality. [Some speculate](#) that may now change. Already, Seoul has started coordinating [‘practical countermeasures’](#) with the EU, which has itself swiftly [condemned North Korea's actions](#). South Korea already appears to contemplate ways of helping Ukraine with [psychological warfare](#) against the North Korean forces in the Kursk region.

China cannot be happy with any of this, not least with the added regional instability on its borders. North Korea has been its client state, entirely dependent on its support, both economically and politically. [China fears it is losing its leverage](#), as Pyongyang may now have an alternative through Russia. Others see Pyongyang as deliberately [playing Russia off against China](#). China has sought to play down the significance of Pyongyang's move, and to

[scotch all talk](#) of an 'axis' forming. However, the perception is spreading in the West that China is the main enabler of Russia's war. Beijing can therefore soon find itself facing Western [pressure to rein in North Korea](#), knowing that failure to do so might jeopardise Chinese business interests.

How much deeper will the Russian-North Korean axis become, and what will China do about it?

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