



## FROM TACTICAL TO STRATEGIC: THE DPRK-RUSSIA MILITARY COOPERATION

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11 June 2025

Bilateral relations between the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK, or North Korea) and Russia, especially their defence and security cooperation, have advanced rapidly since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Initially viewed as a tactical relationship – with North Korea providing ammunition to Russia in return for food, energy and military technology – the partnership now appears to be evolving into a strategic alliance. This shift was formalised by the [Treaty on Comprehensive Strategic Partnership](#) (hereafter 'Treaty') signed by Putin and Kim in June 2024 and ratified by both sides in December of the same year.

[Expert analysis](#) has focused especially on [Article 4](#) of the Treaty, which obligates both sides to 'provide military and other assistance' if either 'is put in a state of war by an armed invasion.' In effect, it constitutes a full-fledged military alliance. More recently, Kim invoked Article 4 to justify the [deployment](#) of the Korean People's Army (KPA) to Kursk, a move that began [last year](#) but was only officially [confirmed](#) by both governments in April this year. This acknowledgement marks a significant deepening of military alignment between Pyongyang and Moscow.

### Implications for DPRK's military posture

The deepening military relationship has drawn significant international attention, particularly regarding its potential impact on the DPRK's military development. The deployment of the KPA, along with the opportunity to field-test exported weapons – such as missiles – under real battlefield conditions, has provided the DPRK with valuable combat experience. In May, the KPA held its [Seventh Conference of Training Officers](#) to share first-hand war insights from soldiers returning from Russia, aiming for "accelerating the qualitative change of the armed forces of the DPRK." This could improve KPA's combat readiness in modern warfare including [counter-drone operations](#), which have been extensively employed in the Russia-Ukraine war.

This strengthened partnership has also cast doubt on the continued relevance of the Treaty on Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance between China and the DPRK. Unlike

the DPRK-Russia Treaty, the China-DPRK Treaty is essentially a defence pact that has offered little in the way of practical military support or concrete security guarantees to Pyongyang. Moreover, Russia's use of nuclear threats aimed at deterring North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO) involvement in Ukraine may also serve as a strategic model for the DPRK, which could [seek to apply similar deterrence logic](#) to dissuade US intervention in a potential future conflict on the Korean Peninsula.

Another concern for the international community is related to the potential transfer of military technologies from Russia to the DPRK. Shortly after signing the Treaty in June 2024, Putin stressed the possibility to develop '[military and technical cooperation](#)' under the Treaty framework. While the specific type of the technologies being transferred remains unclear, it is widely speculated that North Korea may have already received Russian support for its [space programme](#). According to the U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency's [2025 Worldwide Threat Assessment](#), "North Korea has received an offer from Russia to assist its space program, including SLVs, satellites and training."

Further reports from Kyiv assessed that Russia may have transferred '[technologies for low-yield tactical nuclear weapons and submarine missile-launch systems](#)' – capabilities explicitly prioritised by Kim. The North Korean leader has previously emphasised the need to develop tactical nuclear weapons for '[the purpose of operational duty and targets of strike in modern warfare](#)' and the ambitions to strengthen North Korea's [naval capabilities](#) by building more submarines, including nuclear-powered ones. Although the full scope of technology transfer remains unconfirmed, Kim's five-year military plan announced in 2021 includes [ambitions](#) to develop hypersonic missiles, miniaturised nuclear warheads, more accurate intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) with a range of 15,000-kilometres, nuclear-powered submarines and sea-based strategic nuclear weapons, as well as sea-based and ground-based solid-fuel ICBMs. Collectively, these efforts are aimed at enhancing North Korea's nuclear capability and improving the survivability of its second-strike capability.

### **Strategic value and sustainability of the cooperation**

The revival of DPRK-Russia relations has been largely driven by the war in Ukraine, raising questions about how their bilateral cooperation might evolve should a ceasefire agreement be reached between Russia and Ukraine. There are particular [concerns](#) in Europe that any such agreement could simply offer Putin the opportunity to regroup and prepare for a future offensive—echoing the aftermath of Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea, which eventually led to the current full-scale invasion. If this scenario unfolds, regardless of whether a ceasefire agreement is reached, the military alliance between Russia and the DPRK is likely to persist. The [military value](#) Russia gains in its alliance with Pyongyang, ranging from munitions production to the reported deployment of KPA troops, suggests that strategic cooperation could continue regardless of developments in Ukraine.

From a broader strategic perspective, the DPRK-Russia alliance has implications for regional stability [in both Europe and the Indo-Pacific](#). Both countries recognise the leverage they hold. The DPRK's involvement in the war in Ukraine affects European security dynamics, while Russian support for the DPRK's military advancements influences the security environment on the Korean Peninsula and beyond. This mutual leverage may reinforce their determination to sustain and continue to strengthen their bilateral military ties.

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