

# Issue Brief

Vol.130, No.5, 2025

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Russia and North Korea's Official Acknowledgment of  
North Korean Troop Deployment:  
Background and Implications

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## Abstract

On April 28, North Korea officially acknowledged the participation of its troops in the Kursk border region for the first time. Just hours after this announcement, President Vladimir Putin issued a statement on the Kremlin's official website, declaring that "North Korean troops played an active role in the battle that repelled Ukrainian neo-Nazi units that invaded our territory." The Russian Ministry of Defense also released footage depicting North Korean troops engaged in combat training, portraying them as participants in the 'liberation' of Kursk. Earlier, on April 26, Russia, while announcing the full recovery of the Kursk region, made its first public acknowledgment of North Korean troops. The Russian government stated, "North Korean soldiers and officers performed combat missions shoulder to shoulder with Russian troops while repelling Ukrainian aggression." Reports of North Korea dispatching troops to Russia had previously emerged in October 2024, when Ukrainian military intelligence and South Korea's National Intelligence Service confirmed the deployment of North Korean troops. The U.S. State Department and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) later corroborated these claims. However, both North Korea and Russia had consistently denied these reports. This issue brief examines the background and implications of Russia and North Korea's joint acknowledgment of North Korean troop deployments, six months after initial allegations surfaced. The motivations and consequences of this official recognition are analyzed in five key areas: (1) framing the troop deployment as a legitimate act of a normal country; (2) providing a pretext for a potential visit by Kim Jong-un to Russia; (3) securing North Korea's status as a "co-belligerent"; (4) deepening the strategic partnership between Moscow and Pyongyang; and (5) bolstering domestic stability in North Korea through propaganda and the idolization of Kim Jong-un.

### Keywords

Russia, North Korea, Putin, Kim Jong-un, North Korean military, Russo-Ukrainian War, official acknowledgment of troop deployment, participation in war, military feat monument, Victory Day, co-belligerent, war crimes

# Russia and North Korea's Official Acknowledgment of North Korean Troop Deployment: Background and Implications

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On April 26, Russia officially confirmed for the first time that North Korean troops have been participating in its war against Ukraine. During a videoconference with President Vladimir Putin, Chief of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces Valery Gerasimov acknowledged the deployment, emphasizing the North Korean troops' role in the 'liberation' of Russia's Kursk border region.

"I want to point out the participation of servicemen from the Democratic People's Republic of Korea in the liberation of the Kursk region's border areas, who, in accordance with the Treaty on Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between our countries, provided significant assistance in defeating the invading group of the Ukrainian armed forces," Gerasimov said, as reported in a transcript on the Kremlin's official website.

He further noted, "Soldiers and officers of the Korean People's Army, carrying out combat missions shoulder to shoulder with Russian servicemen, displayed high professionalism, fortitude, courage and heroism in repulsing the Ukrainian invasion." This statement marked the first public acknowledgment by a Russian official of North Korean troop involvement.

Two days later, on April 28, Pyongyang officially confirmed the deployment, describing it as part of its strategic partnership with Moscow. The state-run Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) reported that the Central Military Commission of the Workers' Party had issued a written statement on April 27.

In the statement, Pyongyang claimed the deployment fully aligned with the provisions and spirit of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Treaty and reflected its faithful and practical implementation. The Central Military Commission stated that North Korean troops participated in the "operations for liberating the Kursk region," characterizing the mission as a defensive response to Ukraine's "adventurous invasion" of Russian territory. The commission emphasized that the operation had been ordered by Kim Jong-un under Article 4 of the treaty.

North Korea noted that Kim referred to the deployed troops as "representatives of the nation's honor" and described his decision as based on battlefield conditions and treaty obligations. South Korean intelligence estimates North Korea has sent approximately 14,000 troops to support Russia since October 2024, including around 3,000 reinforcements in 2025.

The Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Treaty, signed by Putin and Kim during their summit in June 2024, obligates both nations to provide mutual military support "without delay" in the event of an attack.

Despite earlier intelligence from Ukraine, South Korea, the U.S. State Department, and NATO confirming the deployment of North Korean troops, Pyongyang and Moscow had denied the reports until these recent official statements. This issue brief analyzes the background and implications of their acknowledgment six months after initial reports surfaced.

## **Justification as a Legitimate Act of a Normal Country**

North Korea's statement, issued by the Central Military Commission, argued that the troop deployment was a legitimate exercise of treaty obligations under Article 4 of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Treaty, which stipulates mutual automatic military support in emergencies. The statement declared that North Korea's military actions on Russian territory were fully consistent with the UN Charter, international law, and the spirit of the bilateral treaty.

By framing the deployment as a normal international act between treaty-bound allies, North Korea seeks to legitimize its involvement. Since Kursk is portrayed as a Ukrainian-occupied region of Russia, Pyongyang claims that participation in its defense is lawful under the treaty. However, deploying troops to contested areas of Ukraine—such as Luhansk, Donetsk, Zaporizhzhia, or Kherson—could be construed as an "act of aggression," exceeding the treaty's scope.

Thus, limiting deployment to Kursk may reflect Kim Jong-un's strategic calculation to maintain the image of lawful engagement and preserve the symbolic status of North Korean forces as the "Kursk Liberation Army".

## **A Pretext for Kim Jong-un's Visit to Russia**

On April 26, Russia announced the "complete liberation" of Kursk, which it claimed had been under Ukrainian occupation for nine months. Ukraine refuted Russia's claim, and on April 27, President Zelensky stated via Telegram that Ukrainian forces were actively defending Kursk and certain parts of Belgorod.

Ukrainian military footage, reportedly filmed by drones and body

cameras, appears to show Ukrainian special forces neutralizing a North Korean platoon in the Kursk region. The footage was filmed by eight members of the 6th Special Forces Regiment of the Ukrainian Special Operation Forces (SOF). Regardless of the factual disputes, Russia's declaration of victory and Putin's expression of gratitude to Kim Jong-un and the North Korean military are seen as part of a sophisticated political move. By elevating North Korea's status as a "co-belligerent," Putin may be laying the groundwork for a potential visit by Kim to Moscow for the May 9 Victory Day celebrations—marking the 80th anniversary of the end of World War II. It is plausible that Putin proposed the inclusion of a North Korean Special Forces in the military parade as a co-belligerent state. He may have also suggested the participation of Kim's daughter, Kim Ju-ae, as part of the delegation.

### **North Korea's Acquisition of Co-belligerent Status**

With both Moscow and Pyongyang now officially recognizing North Korean troop involvement, the two states are effectively co-belligerents in the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine. Under international law, North Korean forces are now considered 'lawful combatants' rather than mercenaries, which means that any captured personnel would be entitled to prisoner-of-war status under the Geneva Conventions.<sup>1)</sup> For Kim Jong-un, who has officially acknowledged the participation of the North Korean military in the war, responding to Putin's invitation for a return visit to Russia would not be a 'bad choice,' as it would serve to highlight the 'blood alliance' with Russia, which has facilitated both the circumvention of UN Security Council sanctions and a break from international isolation. North Korea may also seek to secure its rightful stake and compensation as a co-belligerent in

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1) Sang-jung Byun, "The Status of North Korean Troops Deployed to Russia Under International Law," Issue Brief, No. 628, Institute for National Security Strategy, November 21, 2024.

future Russia-Ukraine peace talks, potentially joining Putin at the negotiating table.

However, there are legal risks. Under Article 25 of the Rome Statute, the International Criminal Court (ICC) can prosecute individuals as accomplices in war crimes. On March 17, 2023, the ICC issued an arrest warrant for Vladimir Putin for the forced deportation of Ukrainian children. This precedent raises the possibility that Kim Jong-un could also be referred to the ICC as an accomplice.<sup>2)</sup>

### **Strengthening Russia-North Korea Relations**

President Putin praised the bravery of North Korean forces on the Kremlin's website, stating, "The Russian people will never forget the heroic actions of the North Korean Special Forces who participated in defeating the Ukrainian army at Kursk." He also emphasized, "the strong bond of friendship, neighborly relations and cooperation between the two countries, tempered on the battlefield, will continue to grow and expand across the board," indicating that the close bilateral alignment is likely to continue even after the cessation of the Russo-Ukrainian war.

Military cooperation between the two countries is expanding, now bolstered by the confirmed troop deployment. The year 2025 has seen high-level exchanges between party and government officials, youth organizations, and sports delegations, alongside burgeoning tourism exchanges. North Korea will likely participate in postwar reconstruction projects and expand cooperation in military affairs, diplomacy, economics, and science-technology.

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2) Sang-jung Byun, "Referring Kim Jong Un to the ICC as an 'Accomplice to War Crimes' : Review of International Jurisprudence," Issue Brief, No. 608, Institute for National Security Strategy, October 2, 2024.

## Managing Domestic Perception and Idolizing Kim Jong-un

Until recently, Pyongyang kept the troop deployment hidden from the North Korean public, but growing rumors of large-scale casualties prompted a shift toward open propaganda. On March 12, Korean Central TV aired a program emphasizing loyalty to the leader, Kim Jong-un declaring: "If you step back from the frontlines, your mother who gave birth to such a worthless child will cry." The message concluded: "Son, do not come home until you understand the shame of a lifetime and the true honor of life."

Following Russia and North Korea's official acknowledgment of the deployment and participation of North Korean forces in the war, North Korean media began broadcasting President Putin's statement of gratitude. On April 29, KCNA and *Rodong Sinmun* published the full text of President Putin's remarks praising North Korean troops and their participation in the Kursk liberation operation. Putin expressed his gratitude by conveying his "sincere appreciation" to Kim Jong-un, the North Korean leadership, and its people, stating that "the Korean heroes who gave their lives for Russia and the common freedom will be honored forever, just like their Russian brothers in arms."

Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov also praised the North Korean troops' "fortitude and heroism in every battle," as he claimed the "complete liberation" of Russia's Kursk border region. He also thanked them for their "considerable assistance in defeating the group of Ukrainian armed forces." Their messages serve dual purposes: idolizing Kim Jong-un and comforting the families of deployed soldiers.

Kim Jong-un also announced that "a monument commemorating their combat heroism will soon be erected in our capital" in

honor of the North Korean troops, whom he described as "representatives of the nation's honor." This move reflects an effort to manage public sentiment and prevent domestic unrest, aiming to preempt any destabilizing effects on the regime stemming from the large-scale sacrifices made by North Korean forces.

*The views and opinions expressed in this report are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the official position of INSS.*