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## *Issue Brief*

# Russia-Ukraine War: South and North Korea's Weapons Exports

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## **S***ummary*

While South Korea has been exporting arms to the countries which are supporting Ukraine, North Korea has allegedly sent massive amount of conventional weapons to Russia. The increased arms export by Seoul and Pyongyang may have detrimental effects on regional stability.

## Introduction

The Russia-Ukraine war since 2022 has facilitated the growth in manufacturing of military equipment in some countries of the world. In Northeast Asia, this war has helped both South and North Korea’s weapons exports. While South Korea has been exporting weapons to the Western countries which are supporting Ukraine, North Korea has apparently been supplying massive quantities of weapons to Russia. The signing of the ‘Comprehensive Strategic Partnership’ agreement between Moscow and Pyongyang in June 2024 has further increased the possibilities of military collaboration between these two countries.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) have been strengthening their partnership with South Korea on the issue of Ukraine.<sup>2</sup>

In the past, South and North Korea fought the bitter Korean War (1950-1953) and both still remain officially at war with each other as there had been no peace treaty between the warring parties. Due to the constant fear of another Korean War, the Korean Peninsula happens to be one of the most militarised regions of the world. The nuclearisation of North Korea and its success in developing ballistic missiles which are allegedly capable of carrying nuclear warheads has indeed made the security situation on the Korean Peninsula serious. Remarkably, the North Korean regime has begun threatening to “totally destroy” its foes.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, South Korea has advanced its military capabilities which were showcased on its 76<sup>th</sup> Armed Forces Day on 1 October 2024. Seoul’s Defence Ministry has also been warning of “overwhelming” response to any North Korean provocations.<sup>4</sup>

## Korean Conflict and Defence Industries in South and North Korea

The conflict on the Korean Peninsula has its origins in the Cold War competition between the United States (US) and erstwhile Soviet Union which led to the division of the country in 1945 along the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel. The war between the two Koreas erupted on 25 June 1950 as an effort to reunify the Korean Peninsula, but it spiraled into an international conflict. During the Korean War, the US-led United Nations forces supported Seoul, whereas the Soviet Union and China provided support to Pyongyang. After the Korean War, South Korea established defence alliance with the US in 1953, and North Korea built its own defence treaty with both Moscow and

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<sup>1</sup> Political News Team, [“Treaty on Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea and the Russian Federation Signed”](#), *Rodong Sinmun*, 20 June 2024.

<sup>2</sup> Kim Eun-jung, [“NATO Seeks to Build Practical Cooperation with S. Korea on Ukraine, Defense Industry: Chief”](#), *Yonhap News Agency*, 5 July 2024.

<sup>3</sup> Reuters, [“North Korea Vows to ‘Totally Destroy’ Enemy as Regime Marks End of Korean War”](#), *The Guardian*, 28 July 2024.

<sup>4</sup> Yonhap, [“South Korea Displays ‘Monster’ Hyunmoo-5 Missile for 1st Time for Armed Forces Day”](#), *The Korea Times*, 1 October 2024.

Beijing in 1961. Despite their separate alliances with the two superpowers of the Cold War period, the constant threat of another major conflict on the Korean Peninsula made it imperative for both Korean states to invest heavily on the defence sector. This arms race on the Korean Peninsula and the need to become ‘self-reliant’ had been pivotal in the rapid development of the defence industries in both South and North Korea.<sup>5</sup>

The rise of South Korea’s indigenous arms industries was largely due to the policies of the Park Chung-hee administration (1961-1979). In the milieu of threats of the withdrawal of American forces from the South Korean soil, the Park administration began the strategy of attaining self-reliance in the defence production. In its drive for building heavy and chemical industries needed for weapons production, the South Korean government mobilised the family-controlled big business groups or *chaebol* for the rapid industrialisation of the country.<sup>6</sup> As a result, the state in South Korea supported the private industries and played a pivotal role in the economic transformation of the country.<sup>7</sup> Due to its emphasis on heavy industries and export-oriented policies, South Korea also became one of the largest producers and exporters of ships, automobiles, steel, etc. The transformation of South Korea from one of the poorest countries to a manufacturing powerhouse is popularly called as the ‘Miracle on the Han River’.

On the other hand, despite being one of the poorest countries in the world, North Korea’s expenditure on military is significantly high. The urge to attain autonomy in international affairs pushed the leadership in North Korea to focus on achieving national self-reliance through the promotion of *Juche* ideology.<sup>8</sup> North Korea’s emphasis on self-reliance had also been the guiding principle towards the indigenisation of the defence industries. Apart from conventional weapons, the North Korean regime has been investing in its nuclear weapons programme which is also largely guided by the *Juche* ideology.<sup>9</sup> Apparently, Pyongyang has been successful in developing long-range missiles which are believed to be capable of reaching the mainland US. Recently, the North Korean regime has even vowed to never abandon its nuclear weapons programme.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Chung-in Moon and Sangkeun Lee, “[Military Spending and the Arms Race on the Korean Peninsula](#)”, *Asian Perspective*, Vol. 33, No. 4, 2009, pp. 69–99.

<sup>6</sup> Peter Banseok Kwon, “[Building Bombs, Building a Nation: The State, Chaebol, and the Militarized Industrialization of South Korea, 1973–1979](#)”, *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 79, No. 1, February 2020, pp. 51–75.

<sup>7</sup> Alice H. Amsden, [Asia’s Next Giant: South Korea and Late Industrialization](#), New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1989.

<sup>8</sup> B.C. Koh, “[North Korea and Its Quest for Autonomy](#)”, *Pacific Affairs*, Vol. 38, No. 3/4, Autumn, 1965–Winter, 1965–1966, pp. 294–306.

<sup>9</sup> Edward Howell, “[The Juche H-Bomb? North Korea, Nuclear Weapons and Regime-State Survival](#)”, *International Affairs*, Vol. 96, No. 4, July 2020, pp. 1051–1068.

<sup>10</sup> “[DPRK Will Never Give up Its Nuclear Weapons: KCNA Commentary](#)”, *KCNA*, 29 September 2024.

## South Korea’s Indirect Export of Weapons to Ukraine

The ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine has helped South Korea’s weapons exports.<sup>11</sup> South Korea’s export of defence equipment jumped to US\$ 17 billion in 2022 from US\$ 7.25 in 2021.<sup>12</sup> This dramatic increase in the South Korean export of weapons is actually the result of the efforts of last several decades as Seoul had been striving for self-reliance in defence production. As an export-oriented nation, the sale of weapons in the overseas markets is also a strategy for the economic development for South Korea. The South Korean weapons have found markets in several developing countries of Southeast Asia, Middle East, and in India. The competitive price, fast delivery and good quality of the South Korean weapon systems have made them popular in foreign markets.<sup>13</sup>

The NATO member states which are apprehensive about Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and have been supplying weapons to Kyiv are also buying arms from Seoul. In the wake of war in Ukraine, South Korea clinched a huge deal regarding the sale of various kinds of weapons to Poland, which included tanks, rocket launchers, fighter planes and howitzers. Several other European countries have also shown interest in the weapon systems manufactured by the South Korean companies. Apart from this, South Korea has also sent non-lethal equipment and medicines to Ukraine as a show of solidarity with Kyiv. Notably, Russian President Vladimir Putin threatened Seoul in 2022 against providing lethal weapons to Ukraine. However, the South Korean government denied sending any weapons to Ukraine in support of Kyiv’s ongoing war against Moscow.<sup>14</sup>

## North Korea’s Direct Export of Weapons to Russia

The Russia-Ukraine war has a deep impact on North Korea’s relations with Russia.<sup>15</sup> In the wake of this war, Russia-North Korea military relations have dramatically improved. The Kim dynasty regime in Pyongyang has allegedly exported massive quantities of weapons to Russia in support of Moscow’s war against Ukraine. According to an estimate, till May 2024, North Korea had supplied about 10,000 containers of weapons and other materials to Russia.<sup>16</sup> Earlier, in January 2024 the

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<sup>11</sup> Wooyeal Paik, [“South Korea’s Emergence as a Defense Industrial Powerhouse”](#), *Asie.Visions*, Ifri, No. 139, February 2024.

<sup>12</sup> Defense Acquisition Program Administration, South Korea, cited in Michael Lee, [“Korea Rising as a Defense Supplier amid Global Tensions”](#), *Korea Joongang Ilbo*, 1 May 2023.

<sup>13</sup> Sangmi Cha and Soo-Hyang Choi, [“South Korea Is Making Weapons Faster and Cheaper Than the US”](#), *Bloomberg*, 6 June 2024.

<sup>14</sup> Al Jazeera and News Agencies, [“South Korea Denies Sending Weapons to Ukraine After Putin Remarks”](#), *Al Jazeera*, 28 October 2022.

<sup>15</sup> Yong-Chool Ha and Beom-Shik Shin, [“The Impact of the Ukraine War on Russian-North Korean Relations”](#), *Asian Survey*, Vol. 62, No. 5-6, 2022, pp. 893-919.

<sup>16</sup> Kim Arin, [“Seoul Defense Chief Accuses Russia of Using North Korean Weapons in Ukraine Attack”](#), *The Korea Herald*, 1 June 2024.

remains of a missile found in the Ukrainian city of Kharkiv was believed to be of North Korean origin.<sup>17</sup> More recently, Pyongyang slammed NATO’s criticism of North Korea-Russia military cooperation.<sup>18</sup> Remarkably, in a letter sent to President Putin in October 2024, North Korean leader Kim Jong-un wrote that, “Pyongyang will always stand by Moscow”.<sup>19</sup>

It has been reported that North Korea has significantly increased the production of weapons. Evidently, the North Korean leader Kim Jong-un has been regularly visiting the weapons production facilities and instructing the officials to strive for the expansion and modernisation of the defence industries.<sup>20</sup> Kim Jong-un’s frequent trips to the military hardware production sites is also a part of the goal envisioned during the Eighth Party Congress of North Korea in 2024, to further develop the production of defence equipment within the five-year plan period.<sup>21</sup> The recent testing of new military equipment by the North Korean regime is also speculated to be for those weapons which are meant for export to Russia.<sup>22</sup> Nonetheless, the weapons supplied by North Korea to Russia are considered to be of low quality.<sup>23</sup>

## Implications of Russia-Ukraine War on the Korean Peninsula

The ongoing Russia-Ukraine war has implications for the cross straits relations between China and Taiwan, as well as for the inter-Korean relations. In 2024, North Korea branded South Korea as a “separate country”, and has been destroying infrastructures related to the inter-Korean relations and Korean national reunification.<sup>24</sup> The fast changing geopolitical situation in East Asia and rising tensions on the Korean Peninsula has put pressure on South Korea to increase its defence capabilities. Similarly, North Korea has also been ratcheting up its nuclear belligerence largely due to Pyongyang’s failed negotiations with the US.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Reuters, [“UN Monitors Say North Korean Missile Struck Ukraine’s Kharkiv”](#), *Al Jazeera*, 30 April 2024.

<sup>18</sup> Yonhap, [“N. Korea Decries NATO’s Condemnation of Its Military Cooperation With Russia”](#), *The Korea Times*, 7 October 2024.

<sup>19</sup> [“Respected Comrade Kim Jong Un Sends Greetings to Russian President”](#), *KCNA*, 8 October 2024.

<sup>20</sup> Yonhap, [“NK Leader Inspects Munitions Factory after Key Party Meeting”](#), *The Korea Times*, 3 July 2024.

<sup>21</sup> [“Respected Comrade Kim Jong Un Inspects Defence Industrial Enterprise”](#), *KCNA*, 8 September 2024.

<sup>22</sup> Yonhap, [“North Korea Says It Test-Fired New Tactical Ballistic Missile Capable of Carrying Super-Large Warhead”](#), *The Korea Times*, 2 July 2024.

<sup>23</sup> Cho Jinwoo, translated by Claire Shinyoung Oh Lee and Leejin J. Chung, edited by Eugene Whong and Malcolm Foster, [“Ukraine Military Official: Half of all North Korean Shells are Duds”](#), *Radio Free Asia*, 4 March 2024.

<sup>24</sup> Kim Arin, [“North Korea Notifies UN Command of Plans to Fortify Border with South”](#), *The Korea Herald*, 9 October 2024.

<sup>25</sup> Seo Ji-Eun, [“North Vows to Strengthen Nuclear Arsenal Regardless of U.S. Election Results”](#), *Korea JoongAng Daily*, 5 August 2024.

The visit of President Putin to North Korea in June 2024 in the milieu of ongoing war between Moscow and Kyiv was indeed a significant development. Moreover, the enhancement of Russia-North Korea relations to a ‘Comprehensive Strategic Partnership’ which also envisions for mutual defence in case of invasion by foreign power on any of the two countries has raised serious apprehensions in South Korea. Seoul even hinted at the idea of supplying weapons directly to Ukraine.<sup>26</sup>

In recent months, there has been an increase in the public demand for South Korea’s own nuclear weapons.<sup>27</sup> The alleged death of some North Korean military officers in a Ukrainian attack in October 2024 in Russian-controlled territory raised speculation about the extent of military cooperation between Pyongyang and Moscow.<sup>28</sup> Later in the same month, the National Intelligence Service (NIS) of South Korea confirmed that North Korea would possibly send thousands of soldiers to Russia.<sup>29</sup> In response to the growing North Korea-Russia military partnership, South Korea and the US forged an agreement in July 2024 on the ‘Guidelines for Nuclear Deterrence and Nuclear Operations on the Korean Peninsula’, to integrate Seoul’s conventional weapons and Washington’s nuclear weapons capabilities.<sup>30</sup>

The Korean Peninsula is among the most militarised places in the world and a major conflict zone. While the sale of arms may benefit the two Koreas economically, it may also lead to a new arms race in the region. This is also evident from the fact that North Korea’s advancements in the conventional and nuclear weapons programmes have adverse impact on the security of South Korea. In August 2024, the North Korean military inaugurated 250 new-type missile launchers which have the capacity to severely undermine the anti-ballistic missile defence system of South Korea.<sup>31</sup> Apparently, the Kim dynasty regime in Pyongyang has also been developing nuclear-powered submarines possibly with Russian technical support.<sup>32</sup> Recently, North Korean leader Kim Jong-un has warned against the South Korea-US “nuclear alliance” and against any effort to change the power balance in the Korean Peninsula.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Kwak Yeon-soo, [“South Korea to Consider Supplying Weapons to Ukraine to Counter Russia-NK Military Cooperation”](#), *The Korea Times*, 20 June 2024.

<sup>27</sup> Lee Yu-Jeong, Lee Keun-Pyung and Michael Lee, [“South Koreans Prefer Own Nuclear Deterrent Over U.S. Troops: Survey”](#), *Korea JoongAng Daily*, 27 June 2024.

<sup>28</sup> Michael Lee, [“North Korean Army Officers Reportedly Killed in Ukrainian Missile Strike near Donetsk”](#), *Korea JoongAng Daily*, 6 October 2024.

<sup>29</sup> Yonhap, [“N. Korea Decides To Dispatch 12,000 Soldiers To Support Russia In Ukraine War: Spy Agency”](#), *The Korea Times*, 18 October 2024.

<sup>30</sup> Lim Jeong-Won, [“South Korea, U.S. Form ‘Integrated’ Extended Deterrence System on Sidelines of NATO Summit”](#), *Korea JoongAng Daily*, 12 July 2024.

<sup>31</sup> Lee Hyo-jin, [“N. Korea’s 250 New Missile Launchers Could Overwhelm South’s Defense: Experts”](#), *The Korea Times*, 5 August 2024.

<sup>32</sup> Lee Keun-Pyung and Seo Ji-Eun, [“North Korea Detected Building Nuclear Submarine, South’s Military Says”](#), *Korea JoongAng Daily*, 8 October 2024.

<sup>33</sup> Ji Da-gyum, [“Kim Jong-Un Vows to Thwart ‘Nuclear Alliance’”](#), *The Korea Herald*, 8 October 2024.



## Conclusion

The rise in weapons exports by South and North Korea has further enhanced the strategic significance of the Korean Peninsula in regional and international affairs. While for South Korea, the sale of weapons to Western and Asian countries has largely economic goals, North Korea’s export of weapons to Russia has both economic and geopolitical advantages. Despite supporting Ukraine, Seoul has refrained from sending lethal arms to Kyiv. On the other hand, North Korea has sent men and weapons to support Russia’s war against Ukraine. Although the quality and reliability of South Korean weapons are much higher than those from North Korea, the Russia-Ukraine war has increased the role of Pyongyang in this European conflict.

However, the increased militarisation on the Korean Peninsula and more production of lethal weapons may also trigger a new arms race between the two Korean states. The security situation in and around the Korean Peninsula is increasingly becoming serious. Both South and North Korea have been threatening each other with massive retaliation. Also, the two Korean states are rapidly gaining technological advancements in their arms production. The increased arms export by Seoul and Pyongyang may have detrimental effects on the regional stability. Therefore, there is an urgent need to restart the inter-Korean peace dialogue and minimise the negative impact of arms industries in the Korean affairs.

## About the Author



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