

# MP-IDSA *Commentary*

## Drone Production in South and North Korea

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### **S***ummary*

The interest in the production and export of drones from both South and North Korea in the wake of the Russia–Ukraine war may increase tensions on the Korean Peninsula, going forward.

## Introduction

The Korean Peninsula is one of the highly militarised regions in the world. In the milieu of the ongoing Russia–Ukraine war since 2022, which has seen extensive use of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), the export of defence equipment from both South and North Korea has significantly increased.<sup>1</sup> South Korea has also been focusing on technological innovation in developing new defence systems. In this regard, drone technology has gained attention in South Korea as a new instrument in modern warfare. In North Korea also, drone technology is being used to develop more sophisticated systems for surveillance, as well as for combat operations.

## Defence Production in South and North Korea

The experience of the devastating Korean War (1950–1953) had a deep impact on the development of defence industries in both South and North Korea. The Korean War ended only with an armistice which has still kept the two Koreas technically at war with each other. Due to the continued conflict on the Korean Peninsula, defence industries received top-most priority by the administrations in Seoul and Pyongyang. Apart from the threats of the outbreak of another major conflict on the Korean Peninsula which led to an arms race between South and North Korea, the urge to become ‘self-reliant’ in defence production had also been equally strong in both Seoul and Pyongyang.<sup>2</sup>

In South Korea, the defence production was largely promoted by the Park Chung-hee administration (1961–1979). In the wake of threats of withdrawal of the American troops from South Korea in the 1970s, the need to become self-reliant in defence became the goal of Seoul. In this regard, South Korea reverse engineered weapons mainly received from the United States. Also, the Park Chung-hee government collaborated with family-controlled big capitalist enterprises, known in Korean as *chaebol*, and provided them support to make the country self-reliant in defence production.<sup>3</sup>

In contrast to South Korea, the North Korean defence industries followed socialist principles of state ownership and were promoted to defend the country from the

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<sup>1</sup> Ranjit Kumar Dhawan, “[Russia-Ukraine War: South and North Korea’s Weapons Exports](#)”, Issue Brief, Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (MP-IDSA), 28 October 2024.

<sup>2</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>3</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.

imperialist forces.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, the urge to attain independence in international affairs under the larger ideology of *Juche* in North Korea gave national defence a key priority in the country.<sup>5</sup> Although in the initial years after its establishment, North Korea was heavily dependent on the then Soviet Union for arms procurement, in the later period, the Kim dynasty regime in Pyongyang started manufacturing a number of weapons within the country. North Korean regime even focused on the development of nuclear weapons as part of its *Juche* ideology and to gain legitimacy from the domestic population.<sup>6</sup> The North Korean regime exported some of its ballistic missile technologies in exchange for its nuclear weapons programme. In this regard, North Korea’s nuclear proliferation activities with Pakistan are now well-documented.<sup>7</sup>

## Drones and the two Koreas

The advancement made by South Korea in drone technology was displayed during the country’s Armed Forces Day parade on 1 October 2024, along with other military assets.<sup>8</sup> A day later, South Korean government signed a deal on 2 October 2024 to buy about 200 units of Warmate suicide drones from WB Electronics firm of Poland.<sup>9</sup> Also, for the first time in November 2024, South Korea and the United States conducted a joint military exercise for the use of drones in combat operations.<sup>10</sup> This joint drone exercise tested the compatibility and synergy between the South Korean surveillance drone RQ-4B Global Hawk and the MQ-9 Reaper attack drone from the United States.

It was also reported in December 2024 that South Korea is mulling to obtain about 100 cardboard drones to counter rising threats from North Korea.<sup>11</sup> Later in December 2024, South Korea was stated to start the manufacture of medium-

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<sup>4</sup> Namhoon Cho, “[North Korea’s Defense Industry](#)”, in Keith Hartley and Jean Belin (eds), *The Economics of the Global Defence Industry*, Oxon and New York, NY, Routledge, 2020, pp. 571–594.

<sup>5</sup> Sergei O. Kurbanov, “[North Korea’s Juche Ideology: Indigenous Communism or Traditional Thought?](#)”, *Critical Asian Studies*, Vol. 51, No. 2, 2019, pp. 296–305.

<sup>6</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>7</sup> P.R. Chari and Vyjayanti Raghavan, [Comparative Security Dynamics in Northeast Asia and South Asia](#), New Delhi, Pentagon Security International, 2010.

<sup>8</sup> Sarah Kim, “[Korea’s Latest Weapons Revealed on Armed Forces Day — In Pictures](#)”, *Korea JoongAng Daily*, 2 October 2024.

<sup>9</sup> Lee Hyo-jin, “[S. Korea Seals Deal with Poland to Purchase Suicide Drones](#)”, *The Korea Times*, 2 October 2024.

<sup>10</sup> Yonhap, “[S. Korea, US Stage Joint Drone Strike Drills for 1st Time](#)”, *The Korea Times*, 1 November 2024.

<sup>11</sup> Lee Hyo-jin, “[South Korea Seeks to Procure Cardboard Drones against NK Threats](#)”, *The Korea Times*, 3 December 2024.

altitude unmanned aerial vehicles (MUAVs) which are capable of producing high-resolution pictures. These would be used for surveillance against the North Korean targets.<sup>12</sup> South Korea also planned to conduct military exercises in December 2024 against the infiltration of drones from North Korea in future.<sup>13</sup>

In the milieu of the ongoing Russia–Ukraine war, North Korea has exported several tonnes of weapons to Russia, and has dispatched thousands of soldiers to fight against Ukraine in support of Moscow.<sup>14</sup> The participation of North Korean soldiers in this war has been facilitated due to the ‘Comprehensive Strategic Partnership’ between Moscow and Pyongyang which was signed in June 2024, and later ratified in December 2024. This new treaty has the provision for mutual defence if either of the two countries comes under foreign invasion.<sup>15</sup>

It is also argued that North Korea’s participation in the ongoing conflict between Moscow and Kyiv would provide North Korean soldiers new experiences with regard to the modern warfare and use of drone technology.<sup>16</sup> Recently, the North Korean leader Kim Jong-un has called for significantly increasing the production of ‘suicide attack drones’ and has urged for more research on this technology.<sup>17</sup> The increased production of the suicide drones by North Korea could also be meant for export to Russia to be used against the Ukrainian forces.<sup>18</sup>

However, the advancement in drone technology by the two Koreas could also be used against each other. In the past, drones were apparently sent by both North and South Korea across the Demilitarised Zone (DMZ), which divides the two Koreas, for spying or for spreading propaganda leaflets. In December 2022, South Korea accused North Korea for sending several drones towards Seoul and adjoining areas.<sup>19</sup> This incident of North Korean drones entering into the South Korean airspace led to a serious security challenge for South Korea.

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<sup>12</sup> Yonhap, [“S. Korea Begins Production of Spy Drones for NK Surveillance”](#), *The Korea Times*, 17 December 2024.

<sup>13</sup> Yonhap, [“Military to Conduct Defense Drills against NK Drones This Week”](#), *The Korea Herald*, 18 December 2024.

<sup>14</sup> Choe Sang-Hun, [“What North Korea Gains From Its Alliance With Russia — and What It Risks”](#), *The New York Times*, 17 December 2024.

<sup>15</sup> [“DPRK-Russia Treaty on Comprehensive Strategic Partnership”](#), *KCNA*, 20 June 2024.

<sup>16</sup> Yonhap, [“Zelenskyy Says NK Troops Deployed To Western Russia Killed, Injured”](#), *The Korea Times*, 2 December 2024.

<sup>17</sup> Political News Team, [“Respected Comrade Kim Jong Un Guides Performance Test of Suicide Attack Drones of Various Types”](#), *Rodong Sinmun*, 15 November 2024.

<sup>18</sup> Yonhap, [“N. Korea Preparing For Additional Troop Deployment, Suicide Drone Supply To Russia: Seoul”](#), *The Korea Times*, 23 December 2024.

<sup>19</sup> Jean Mackenzie and Robert Plummer, [“North Korean Drone Reaches North of Seoul”](#), *BBC*, 26 December 2022.

Later, in October 2024, the Kim dynasty regime claimed that South Korea sent drones to scatter anti-Pyongyang propaganda leaflets over the sky of North Korea and warned of “horrible disaster” if it happens again in future.<sup>20</sup> The North Korean state media even released the pictures of a drone allegedly sent by Seoul.<sup>21</sup> On the other hand, South Korean defence ministry flatly denied any role in sending drones laden with propaganda leaflets to North Korea.<sup>22</sup>

## Conclusion

The advent of the drone technology in modern warfare has created new opportunities and challenges. The demand for such low-cost, expendable, but precise and lethal power of drones has increased across the world. While it has helped export-oriented nations in their defence production, it has also added lethality by causing massive destruction at a much cheaper cost. The ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine has proved the efficiency of the drones. In this regard, while the interest in the production and export of drones from both South and North Korea would help them economically, it may also increase tensions on the Korean Peninsula.

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<sup>20</sup> Yonhap, [“North Korea Says It Ordered Front-Line Artillery Units to Fully Prepare to Open Fire”](#), *The Korea Times*, 13 October 2024.

<sup>21</sup> [“Truth about ROK’s Serious Provocation of Violating DPRK’s Sovereignty Uncovered: Spokesman for DPRK Ministry of National Defence”](#), *Rodong Sinmun*, 20 October 2024.

<sup>22</sup> [“North Korea Accuses South Korea of Sending Propaganda Drones to Pyongyang”](#), *Al Jazeera*, 11 October 2024.

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