



By: Tomorrow's Affairs Staff

Shoigu's shopping list in Pyongyang - trade out of necessity and violation of UN resolutions



Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu arrived in Pyongyang wearing a military uniform and met with the highest North Korean officials, including the nation's leader Kim Jong Un.

Shoigu's military outfit is only slightly related to the fact that his country has already been at war for 17 months. His appearance had a role to play up the military nature of the North Korean regime on the occasion of the 70th anniversary of the armistice agreement ending the Korean War.

Since he landed at the airport in Pyongyang as one of the two foreigners to set foot on the soil of North Korea after the three-year lockdown, Shoigu's appearance has carried the message - We need you!

Russia has long denied obtaining weapons from North Korea. This time was no different. A clear breach of Security Council resolutions, of which Russia is a permanent member with veto power, would result from purchasing weapons from North Korea.

But why should the announcement of Shoigu's ministry exclude the acquisition and sale of weapons? ("This visit will contribute to strengthening Russian-North Korean military ties").

Russia and North Korea could persuade a few that they are not involved in the arms trade.

The arms business already exists

Last November, the US National Security Council published the intelligence services' findings that North Korea has been "covertly supplying Russia's war in Ukraine with a

significant number of artillery shells".

This was a somewhat softened assessment compared to earlier media reports (The New York Times) that Pyongyang has been exporting "millions" of artillery shells and missiles to Russia, but also a confirmation that the business exists.

NSC spokesman John Kirby also spoke about the continuity of the ammunition arrangement last March. He said Russia sent a delegation to Pyongyang to offer food in exchange for weapons.

As a result, Shoigu's trip to Pyongyang was not intended to strike a deal with Kim Jong Un under which Russia would purchase weapons from North Korea and pay for them with food, oil, military technology, and possibly some hard currency.

Such a deal already exists, and it was not necessary, or expected, for the Russian Minister of Defence and Vladimir Putin's closest associate to conclude it publicly during a three-day visit, during which he visited weapons exhibitions and attended a military parade accompanied by the North Korean leader.

Shoigu's visit has been strategic

Shoigu's visit has been strategic, and its purpose was to confirm the existing arrangements and most likely negotiate their expansion.

Procurement of artillery ammunition has been a genuine and urgent priority of Shoigu's mission.

North Korea is ideal as a supplier because it

fulfils both conditions - it has a more than favourable attitude towards the Russian aggression against Ukraine, and more significantly, it has huge stockpiles of ammunition that Russia needs - technologically outdated and produced according to Soviet standards.

The lengthy war has exhausted Russian reserves, for which, even at the very start of the war, it was not clear (even to Russia) how full and usable they were.

Ukraine estimated Russia's stockpiles of artillery ammunition at slightly more than half a million shells. Some Western estimates went as high as 16 million, but perhaps as much as half of that was unusable due to decades of poor maintenance.

Consumption, again, was broadly estimated, but not less than 5,000 artillery shells fired per day.

The need for large quantities of ammunition in Russia is essential when we consider the Ukrainian army regularly destroys Russian ammunition storage facilities and that the capacity has been estimated at roughly 20,000 artillery rounds per month.

Ammunition was not the only thing on the shopping list

Shoigu's main responsibility was to acquire fresh supplies of desperately needed artillery ammunition, but his work did not have to stop there.

Given the extensive and prolonged deployment of artillery in the conflict in Ukraine, the wear and tear on its tubes from the enormous number of missiles fired, and

the considerable casualties suffered thus far in the conflict, North Korea would be a desirable supplier of artillery systems for Russia.

Pyongyang has a vast arsenal of these weapons, estimated at more than 20,000 Soviet-standard 122mm, 152mm and 170mm howitzers. There are also large quantities, estimated at more than 3,000 Korean-made tanks, but replicas of the Soviet-era Russian T-62 and T-72 tanks.

Russia is compelled to widen its arms agreements with North Korea in order to avoid a drawn-out and draining war of conquest. Since its regular supply chains have run dry and its pool of suppliers is exceedingly small, Pyongyang is one of the last resorts.

At the same time, Moscow benefits from the agreements with North Korea since they are affordable and might be serviced with food and oil, which is crucial for the country's isolated war economy.

Pyongyang wants to expand business with Moscow

Pyongyang also has reasons to strengthen these deals. It can allow itself to empty vast stocks of obsolete weapons, primarily ammunition, if, in return, it receives much-needed food and energy, and also a portion in hard currency.

Dealing arms with Russia is logistically incomparably easier for North Korea than its previous large arms export deals to Syria, Iran and Myanmar.

Instead of risky transport by ships, due to international sanctions, Pyongyang could export weapons to Russia by rail across a

narrow strip of shared land border.

Also, North Korea will use Shoigu's emergency purchase to renew and strengthen Russian technological support for its nuclear programme, established in the 1950s and 1960s, with the help of the Soviet Union.

After Shoigu's visit to Pyongyang, the two partners are on the way to "strengthen military ties", as announced by the Russian Ministry of Defence. But that cooperation is far from legal and acceptable for the rest of the world, and expressly prohibited by the Security Council decisions, with the consent of Russia as a permanent member.