



By: *Tomorrow's Affairs Staff*

What does China lose with the North Korean soldiers in Russia?



Beijing has continued to ignore increasingly convincing reports of the deployment of thousands of North Korean soldiers in Russia, thus confirming its unease at the aggressive moves of its ideological protégé.

"China does not have information on that," said a spokesman for the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs last Friday. Similar disregard comes from Moscow, whose ambassador to the UN, Vassily Nebenzia, told the Security Council last Tuesday that officials' reports of thousands of North Korean soldiers joining Russian troops were "barefaced lies."

Persistent denial of even confirmed facts is a traditional manner of both Russian and Chinese diplomacy, but in this case their motives are different.

Moscow will certainly deny for a long time that it "imported" thousands of fighters from North Korea, just as it tirelessly denied that it imports weapons, especially drones, from Iran, also an important military ally.

Simply, any confirmation in this respect would harm the reputation of the Russian army, which the Kremlin presents as one of the world's largest armed forces, with unlimited resources sufficient to conduct operations in Ukraine.

On the other hand, China's silence on the new level of military cooperation between North Korea and Russia shows that Beijing is dissatisfied with such a development and wants to buy itself time to adjust its strategy with regard to a major change in the security level between the allies.

Did Beijing know about the decisions of Moscow and Pyongyang?

Following the initial warnings from Ukraine and South Korea about sending thousands of North Korean soldiers to support the Russian invasion effort, confirmations from the top of the Western security structures also arrived

this week.

"The fact that they now need to outsource for foreign troops to help support their forces inside Russia indicates that there's some serious questions in terms of their ability to continue to sustain their personnel requirements," said Pentagon Press Secretary Air Force, Gen. Pat Ryder, last Tuesday.

Simultaneously, the new NATO Secretary General, Mark Rutte, confirmed the situation based on intelligence reports. He called the deployment of North Korean soldiers in the ranks of the Russian army a "significant escalation" and a "dangerous expansion."

Have North Korea and Russia, with the support in manpower, reached a point where Beijing could accept their military rapprochement?

Beijing appears surprised by this development, but it is unlikely that it was unaware of the operation to send up to 10,000 North Korean soldiers to support the Russian army.

Beijing has tolerated North Korea's massive arms shipments to Russia so far, as it regarded it as a way to take the pressure off itself to provide Russia with direct arms assistance.

However, sending thousands of troops is a whole new level of North Korean engagement in Russia. It is certainly part of the **agreement** on military cooperation, which Vladimir Putin and Kim Jong Un concluded in Pyongyang last June.

But have North Korea and Russia, with the support in manpower, reached a point where Beijing could accept their military rapprochement?

Escalation that China does not want

China, being the undisputed most influential

ally and geopolitical patron of North Korea, finds itself in a position to explain Pyongyang's recent aggressive actions. By sending thousands of soldiers to Russia, the Pentagon says even in the Kursk region where Ukrainian troops have entered, North Korea has stepped out of its (and China's) backyard and is directly involved in a security crisis in faraway Europe.

“China is caught between paralysis and incompetence on this. While they are supporting Russia’s efforts in the war indirectly, they cannot be happy with the D.P.R.K. piece. There is nothing good for them in this, short or long term,” said Victor D. Cha, professor at Georgetown University.

Although it has not condemned Russian aggression against Ukraine in almost three years, China is trying to maintain a restrained position—certainly no new escalation. President Xi Jinping confirmed this at the recent BRICS summit in Kazan, Russia, where he advocated ending the war as quickly as possible.

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However, the actions of North Korea and Russia directly lead to escalation, not only on the Ukrainian front but also in the Pacific region, a situation Beijing undoubtedly aims to avoid.

The fact that the issue of North Korea's military interference in the Ukraine crisis will be at the top of the agenda at the annual meeting of the defence ministers of the US, Lloyd Austin, and South Korea, Kim Yong-hyun, also demonstrates that the concern has grown rapidly.

This also calls into question Beijing's reputation as the security headquarters of anti-Western allies in the Indo-Pacific and globally.

Differences in priorities between allies

Russia, and North Korea even more, have tarnished the reputation Beijing has meticulously cultivated over the years, creating the impression that the two partners have been operating behind the back of their primary economic and security ally.

Moscow and Pyongyang are undoubtedly aware of the possibility that China could re-evaluate its ally stance towards them. However, their decision to raise their military cooperation to a new level indicates that they are willing to accept the risk of a potential cooling of relations with Beijing. In other words, the military alliance between Moscow and Pyongyang remains paramount and currently holds greater significance than any potential issues with Beijing.



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Of particular concern to China may be the murky terrain its Russian and North Korean allies are entering when it comes to nuclear weapons.

One of the few explicit positions of China and its leader Xi Jinping since the start of the Russia-Ukraine war has been his opposition to any nuclear escalation.

Sending thousands of soldiers to Russia is a huge favour for North Korea—so huge that the counter favour that Pyongyang would ask for could be just as huge. Growing Russian aid in

the nuclear sector could potentially disrupt the security balance in East Asia.

China is committed to preventing any security escalation in its backyard, particularly in the nuclear domain. That is why, despite ignoring the Russian-North Korean escalation in Europe, China has been actively seeking the appropriate solution. It will have to carefully measure its positions towards close partners while at the same time not worsening the reputation of a key security actor in the region.