

Russian and North Korea artillery deal paves the way for dangerous cyberwar alliance

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Both North Korea and Russia are highly equipped cyber nations, this deal has the potential for them to share technology.

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Russia is currently firing some [14 million](#) shells a year in Ukraine. They are only manufacturing [2 million](#). The Ukrainians, on the other hand, are firing around [2.5 million](#) shells a year, but are also struggling to source them.

A [deal between North Korea and Russia](#) for artillery rounds, which the respective leaders have said they are “actively [advancing](#)”, is a simple solution to Russia’s problem. But it is a deal that is fraught with dangers for global stability.

The sanctions on Russia since their invasion of Ukraine have limited where they can buy military equipment, including artillery rounds : it has made requests to [China](#), [Iran](#) and now North Korea. China has been warm but publicly resisted directly supplying equipment into the battlefield.

Iran has sold Russia drones and a small quantity of shells. North Korea is the first nation to make the move to directly supply a large quantity of ammunition for Russian artillery. Placed within its wider context this deal will likely be written up in history as part of the journey to a wider war.

Both Russian president Vladimir Putin and North Korean leader Kim Jong-Un are reluctant to travel internationally. The meeting with Putin on September 13 is the first time Kim has travelled internationally since the outbreak of COVID in 2020.

He travelled in a heavily armoured [train](#). A face-to-face meeting is a [symbolically](#) important event for both men : because of its rarity and because its proximity signals trust.

What Russia needs

Russian ground offensives and their well dug-in [defensive](#) lines have been reliant on the extensive use of artillery.

The Russian army has been [ineffective](#) at maintaining their supplies of shells, which has increased the pressure on them to buy from the international market. By contrast, the stocks of shells on the Korean peninsula - a legacy of the Korean War (1950-1953), which still remains technically at

ceasefire, rather than over - are well maintained by North and South Korea.

Consequently, the US is buying [South Korean](#) shells to transfer to Ukraine, and Russia will shortly be receiving North Korean shells. The rates of fire from both sides can, therefore, be maintained while their domestic industries continue to transform to meet the needs of this war.

Russia is not a natural ally of North Korea. In the 1990s, [Russia](#) was part of international efforts to restrain North Korea's development of nuclear technologies.

By instinct, Russia, like China, has a strong preference for stability in its near neighbours, and a nuclear North Korea with the ability to reach the US or Europe would be destabilising. However, the invasion of Ukraine and the need for a large amount of artillery ammunition has created the basis for this pragmatic alliance.

What does Kim want ?

North Korea wants to trade its ammunition for cash, for [food aid](#) and for advanced military technologies. How much Russia transfers in these categories will be the best guide to how much Russia needs North Korean ammunition.

Regardless of its need, Russia is unlikely to transfer anything beyond improved missiles for North Korea's nuclear programme : but not hypersonic missiles or miniaturised warheads. Stability in the region remains a strategic concern for Russia, which is in part why US [intelligence](#) sought to publicise early rounds of talks to dissuade Russia from carrying on.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has strengthened international alignments. Nato has been joined by formerly neutral nation [Finland](#) and has an application from [Sweden](#). South Korea and [Japan](#) have become much closer, while Russia, China, Iran and North Korea have also moved closer into [alignment](#).

Collaboration on spy satellites, mapping and live intelligence, including communications hacking would also be challenging for the Ukrainians. The connection between a small and nasty war in Eastern Europe with the historical and current tensions in Asia is profoundly dangerous and provides a realistic stepping stone to a wider war.

Cyberwar implications

Both [North Korea](#) and Russia are highly capable cyberwar and cyber intelligence nations : they can disrupt or break key infrastructure and steal sensitive government information. North Korea's [Lazarus](#) group of hackers has been identified -- through careful process tracing -- to be responsible for thefts of crypto currency totalling tens of [millions of dollars](#).

[Russia's](#) efforts in online fraud, disinformation and disruption to core infrastructure has become a significant threat to western societies.

Some of the Lazarus Group's stolen cryptocurrency is stuck because the individual wallets where it is held have been identified. Russia is a potentially valuable collaborator in finding alternative routes to move the "coins" and realise much of the profit.

Mix this with Chinese, Russian and Iranian expertise in influencing operations, hacking and

psychological warfare and their collective ability to shape the politics and values of the Euroatlantic area is considerable. The digital flank of this conflict and the ongoing tensions on the Korean peninsula are greatly enhanced by closer collaboration between Russian and North Korea.

An agreement to supply artillery shells is only one aspect of this deal. The wider dangers come from how it will serve to fuel the Ukrainian conflict, and how it brings together Russia, North Korea, China and Iran into a form of alliance. Ultimately, this deal paves the way for more dangerous technology transfers and it connects the Eastern European conflict more directly with tensions in Asia.

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