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## ***Recognizing the assistance of the Korean military in the liberation of the occupied areas of Kursk Oblast***

At the end of April 2025, the leadership of the Russian Federation and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) officially acknowledged the participation of North Korean troops in the liberation of the Kursk region. Until that point, Russia had neither confirmed nor denied the presence of DPRK forces on the front lines.

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### **Timeline of Events**

On April 26, 2025, Chief of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces, Valery Gerasimov, while reporting to President Vladimir Putin on the complete liberation of the Kursk region, mentioned the involvement of North Korean military personnel in the campaign. "I would especially like to highlight the contribution of the armed forces of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea in the liberation of the border areas of the Kursk region. In accordance with the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Agreement, they provided significant assistance in defeating the Ukrainian group that had penetrated the area. Soldiers and officers of the Korean People's Army, working shoulder to shoulder with Russian servicemen to repel the Ukrainian invasion, demonstrated high professionalism, steadfastness, courage, and heroism in battle."

A monument to commemorate the heroic deeds of the proud sons of the DPRK will soon be erected in the Russian capital

Later, Russian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova noted that DPRK servicemen had taken part in the liberation of the Kursk region in accordance with Article Four of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Treaty, and emphasized that "we will never forget our friends."

On the following day, April 27, the North Korean news agency KCNA published a statement from the Central Military Commission of the Workers' Party of Korea, which "highly praised the combat units of the armed forces of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea who performed heroic feats in the operation to repel and thwart the blatant violation of sovereignty by the Ukrainian authorities, who had invaded the territory of the Russian Federation, and to fully liberate the occupied areas of the Kursk region."

Moreover, the statement announced that "a monument to commemorate the heroic deeds of the proud sons of the DPRK will soon be erected in the Russian capital, and flowers from the homeland and the people, who wish them immortality, will be laid at the graves of the fallen soldiers."

Finally, on April 28, Vladimir Putin himself spoke about North Korean assistance, saying, "We pay tribute to the heroism, the high level of special training, and the selflessness of the Korean warriors, who defended our Motherland as their own, fighting shoulder to shoulder with Russian soldiers. We will always honor the Korean heroes who gave their lives for Russia, for our shared freedom, equally with their Russian brothers-in-arms." Overall, Putin praised the heroism and training of the DPRK soldiers and expressed gratitude personally to Kim Jong-un and the North Korean leadership for the contribution of their troops.

After this official acknowledgment, videos surfaced showing KPA soldiers either engaged in combat or training alongside Russian forces.

### **Reaction of the West and South Korea**

The U.S. State Department spokesperson promptly declared that "North Korea and its partners have further entrenched the Russia-Ukraine war and must be held accountable," and stressed that "the deployment of DPRK forces to Russia and any reciprocal support provided by the Russian Federation must cease," pointing out that Russian training of North Korean soldiers violates multiple UN Security Council resolutions which together impose a broad ban on the provision or receipt of military training or assistance to or from the DPRK.

South Korea harshly condemned the DPRK's statement acknowledging troop deployment to Russia, saying that "by recognizing the deployment and claiming that it fully complies with international law, they once again mock the international community." The government of the Republic of Korea called on Russia and North Korea to "immediately cease their illegal military cooperation," emphasizing that it "gravely undermines peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific region and beyond, including Europe."

In a more figurative vein, Ministry of Unification official Koo Byung-sam commented that "no matter how hard North Korea tries to block out the sky with its hands, it cannot conceal

the truth that the deployment represents an illegal act, contrary to international norms, a violation of human rights, and an unethical move that sacrifices young North Koreans for the security of the regime.”

Fake news regarding KPA presence had appeared long before any Koreans actually arrived in the Kursk region. One video, allegedly showing “dozens of Asian soldiers speaking with a North Korean accent receiving equipment at the Sergievsky training ground in Russia’s Far East.” actually featured individuals with darker skin tones and facial features uncharacteristic of Koreans. Pro-government blogger Ruslan Karmanov suggested that the footage likely showed Laotian soldiers from the “LaRos-2024” exercises. As for the supposed “intercepted letters from North Korean soldiers found on corpses,” even defectors from South Korean human rights NGOs pointed out the incorrect use of language and the presence of South Korean vocabulary.

### **Author’s Commentary**

It is clear that, for a time, openly addressing the presence of North Koreans was inconvenient due to military secrecy, but now some commentary is possible.

The decision to involve the Korean People’s Army was clearly a difficult one, fraught with risks, but potential problems were successfully circumvented. The limited size of the contingent (10,000–13,000 troops including rotation) helped to minimize logistical, administrative, and linguistic challenges. Public opinion in Russia perceived the presence of North Koreans not as an attempt to “plug a gap due to lack of forces,” but rather as a combination of fraternal assistance and an opportunity for the DPRK to gain critical modern warfare experience. The status of “Schrödinger’s North Koreans” and their exclusive operations within Russian territory closed off any possibility for the West to retaliate by sending NATO troops to the front.

Although DPRK–Russia military cooperation provoked anger in Seoul, it did not lead to heightened regional tensions. Joint U.S.–South Korea exercises continued as before, much as they had under President Biden, while South Korea’s greater concern lay in the possible transfer of breakthrough military technologies to the North. Contributing factors included Donald Trump’s desire to play the role of peacemaker and the constitutional crisis/impeachment proceedings against President Yoon Suk-yeol.

This situation largely echoed the earlier episode regarding ammunition supplies, when reports — including fabricated ones — emerged well before real deliveries took place.

For the DPRK, the main benefit has been gaining real-world modern combat experience. As experts from the Institute of China and Contemporary Asia of the Russian Academy of

Sciences noted, one of the Korean People's Army's major weaknesses has been insufficient troop training due to fuel and spare parts shortages and limited exposure to modern warfare practices. Now, KPA troops first trained on Russian ranges and then reinforced their skills in actual combat.

What next? Two possibilities are being discussed. Either, with combat experience acquired and Russian territory secured, North Korean active involvement will conclude—though observers and technical experts will likely remain and propaganda from Kyiv and elsewhere will continue “discovering” KPA soldiers wherever an Asian-looking body is found, often accompanied by fake documents.

More likely, cooperation between the two countries will expand into other areas. In South Korea, there is already discussion of a possible upcoming summit or the potential presence of Kim Jong-un at the May 9, 2025 celebrations in Moscow, although no official confirmation has yet been given.

Konstantin Asmolov, April 30, 2025

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