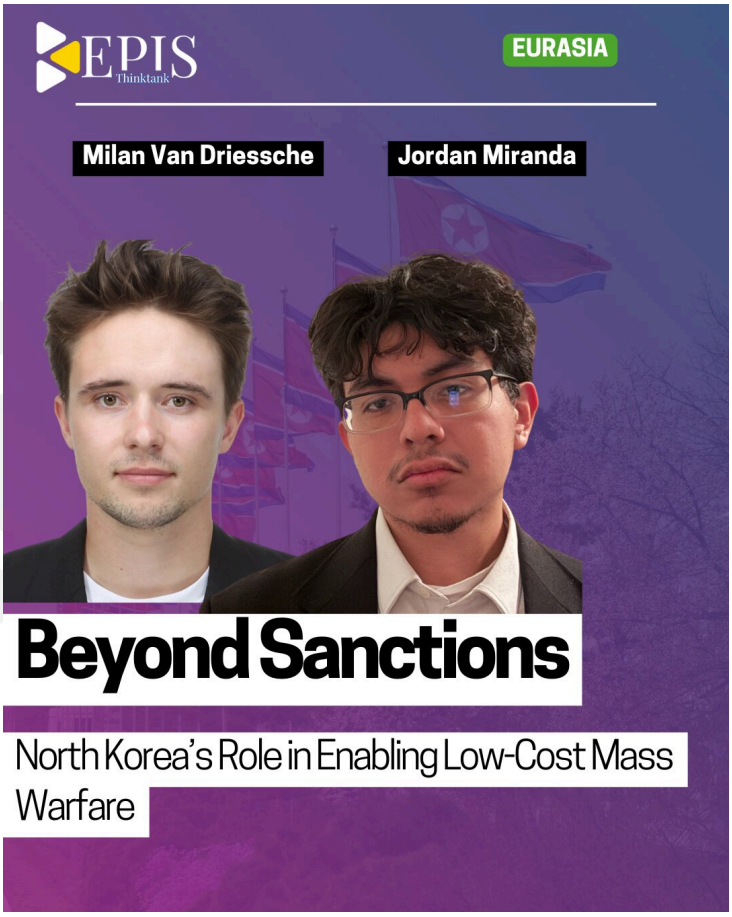
Beyond Sanctions

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Introduction

For decades, Western strategic thinking has treated North Korea primarily as a proliferation problem, a rogue state to be contained, sanctioned, and isolated. This framing, while not inaccurate, has increasingly obscured a more consequential reality: North Korea has become an active enabler of large-scale conventional warfare, operating at the center of a growing network of sanctioned states that are collectively reshaping the military balance across Eurasia.

This article argues that North Korea's strategic significance has been systematically underestimated. Rather than an isolated actor seeking regime

survival through nuclear deterrence alone, Pyongyang has become a critical node in a Russia–Iran–North Korea axis of military cooperation that links geographically separate conflict zones into a single, self-reinforcing pressure system. By supplying the munitions that sustain Russia's war of attrition in Ukraine, including artillery shells and ballistic missiles such as the KN-23 and Hwasong-11 variants, produced at significantly lower unit cost than comparable Russian systems, North Korea plays a central role in sustaining prolonged high-intensity warfare. It also supports Iran's regional posture while receiving in return advanced military technologies and economic relief. In combination, these exchanges enable a model of sustained mass warfare that existing deterrence frameworks are poorly equipped to address.

North Korea's influence in Russia: Sustaining a war of attrition

Expansion of a wartime partnership

North Korea's relationship with Russia has shifted from limited arms trade to a sustained wartime supply system that now plays a measurable role in Russia's military campaign in Ukraine. This cooperation combines ammunition supply, weapons transfers, personnel deployment and industrial exchange into a single strategic framework. Both states operate under extensive international sanctions, which makes this relationship useful for maintaining military capacity while reducing dependence on external markets. This has resulted in a more structured form of wartime interdependence rather than isolated transactions.

Artillery, missile support, and troop deployments

North Korea has supplied Russia with approximately 33,000 containers of military ammunition since 2023, estimated to contain millions of artillery rounds. These are predominantly 122 mm and 152 mm shells compatible with Russian weapons systems. Some analyses suggest that during key phases of the war, North Korean ammunition accounted for 30 to 40 percent of Russia's total artillery expenditure. Without these deliveries, Russia would likely have struggled to maintain its artillery tempo given the limitations of its own production capacity. Notably, shipments have repeatedly coincided with major Russian offensives, suggesting direct coordination between supply flows and frontline requirements.

North Korea has also transferred artillery systems, including 170 mm self-propelled guns, 240 mm multiple rocket launchers, and 107 mm rocket systems, broadening Russia's indirect fire options despite these being older designs. More consequentially, Pyongyang has transferred ballistic missiles, specifically KN-23 and Hwasong-11 variants, which have since been used in strikes against Ukrainian territory. This marks a meaningful escalation beyond ammunition supply toward active strike support. By early 2025, over a hundred such missiles had been delivered, and their combat use had given

North Korea something valuable in return: real battlefield performance data that can directly inform future missile development.

Beyond weapons and ammunition, approximately 16,000 North Korean troops have been deployed to Russia, primarily to the Kursk region. These deployments have been carried out in phases and go beyond combat personnel, encompassing engineering and construction units as well. Roles range from logistics and border security to reconstruction work. This signals that the partnership has moved well beyond material supply into the direct contribution of human resources to Russian operational needs.

Beyond the battlefield

The Russia–North Korea relationship has quietly expanded well beyond the battlefield. Alongside arms transfers and troop deployments, both states are increasingly investing in narrative management, economic exchange, and humanitarian cooperation. These dimensions may lack the visibility of missile deliveries, but they serve an equally important function: legitimising and sustaining the broader partnership in the eyes of both domestic audiences and the wider world.

Both governments are actively coordinating their propaganda and disinformation efforts, formalised most recently through agreements between Russia's state news agency TASS and North Korea's Korean Central News Agency. The two agencies have committed to closer information exchange and to jointly countering what both sides conveniently label "fake news." The result is a shared narrative framework that allows both regimes to present their wartime alignment as politically legitimate at home and, where possible, abroad. While framed as a joint effort to counter "disinformation," these agreements in practice enable tighter coordination of state-controlled narratives. For Russia, this helps normalise North Korea's role in the war and reframe Pyongyang as a strategic partner rather than an isolated authoritarian outlier. For North Korea, it provides an ideological justification for involvement in a distant European conflict, embedding military support within a narrative of sovereignty and resistance to Western influence. In that sense, the information domain has become a parallel front, one aimed at sustaining political support and legitimising their growing strategic convergence.

Alongside these informational efforts, cooperation is expanding into economic and humanitarian domains. Officials from Russian-occupied Kherson have already opened talks with North Korean diplomatic representatives on agricultural cooperation. Given North Korea's chronic food shortages, commodities such as flour, vegetable oil, and processed food represent obvious areas of mutual interest. It illustrates how Russia's ability to support Pyongyang now stretches well beyond military technology into the kind of economic assistance that directly underpins regime stability.

Finally, beyond military cooperation, Russia has increasingly promoted North Korea as a legitimate partner within its domestic political and cultural space. Russian state institutions organise exhibitions, academic exchanges,

and cultural events aimed at portraying North Korea in a positive light. Public messaging by senior Russian officials similarly frames North Korea as a friendly state and a potential destination for tourism and cooperation. This reflects an effort to normalise the relationship domestically and align public perception with the broader foreign policy realignment.

A partnership of mutual interest

Russia's artillery and missile consumption has consistently outpaced its domestic production capacity, creating a gap that North Korea is well-positioned to fill. Pyongyang holds large stockpiles of compatible ammunition and has clear incentives to export military surplus in exchange for financial and technological compensation. The war in Ukraine is, in that sense, a windfall for North Korea: it generates revenue while simultaneously serving as a live testing ground for its weapons systems. This dynamic has created a form of mutual dependence that makes both states more resilient under sanctions pressure, rather than more vulnerable to it.

What North Korea gets out of this arrangement goes further still. There are indications that Russia is providing Pyongyang with assistance in missile development, drone technology, and possibly satellite-related systems, which are capabilities that North Korea has long struggled to develop independently. North Korean workers are also being integrated into Russian defence industrial sites, including facilities linked to drone production. This points to something more significant than a transactional arms deal: a gradual merging of industrial capacity through which North Korea is quietly upgrading its own military-technological base.

North Korea's influence in Iran: Enabling missile and air capabilities

A strategically troublesome anti-American duo

The relationship between North Korea and Iran has evolved from opportunistic arms trade into a sustained strategic partnership aimed at missile development, production, and broader military capacity enlargement. On the broader scope, it forces the United States and other regional allies to not just consider North Korea as an East Asian threat, but as a transcontinental actor that is enabling upheaval. Practically, Pyongyang has played a massive role in supporting Iran's missile infrastructure program by providing both the technological and industrial foundations for Tehran to maintain long-range strike capabilities under persistent sanctions. In addition to this, Iran has a similar security landscape to North Korea in the sense that both would have to retaliate against their enemy's allies because the United States happens to be far. It would thus make sense for both countries to have similar missile infrastructure and long-range strike considerations. Evidence suggests that much of Iran's liquid-fuel ballistic system is directly influenced by North Korean designs, including the Scud and Nodong family variants, which underpin systems such as the Qiam, Ghadr, and Emad mis-

siles now used in regional strikes. This level of integration and knowledge demonstrates how operational expertise, production processes, and entire system layouts are all embedded in the Iran-North Korea relationship.

Beyond the missile systems, North Korea has supported Iran's ability to domestically producing and maintaining these weapons. It has been reported that Pyongyang has assisted in establishing missile production facilities in Iran and continues to supply components and technical support, allowing Iran to bypass sanctions and international monitoring. North Korean technical assistance provides Iran with an adaptation of an independent weapons production program that enables Iran to supply proxy groups and Russia. North Korea's silent but significant aid to Iran thus produces another anti-American regional threat that has been able to tie down American resources in the Middle East that would otherwise go to East Asia.

Aerial Domain

This cooperation extends into the aerial domain as well. Reports indicate that North Korea's support has included surveillance systems, dual-use technologies, and air defense items that strengthened Iran's ability to pester American air superiority. When paired with drones, it allows Iran to produce low-cost weapons that reduce American and Israeli high-cost production weapons systems while maintaining Iranian inventories. While less visible than ballistic missile transfers, these contributions enhance Iran's capacity to survive under the current war.

In effect, North Korea's influence has given Iran the ability to field a more capable, resilient, and mobile sustainable missile and air defense architecture. In the face of a technologically dominant America, a low-cost and sanctions-evading Iranian posture has complicated U.S. strategic planning by creating a multi-theater challenge. Resources and attention must be distributed across several American-aligned nations in the Middle East while maintaining a competitive production program against Iran.

A triangular axis of military support

Taken together, the cooperation of North Korea, Russia, and Iran reveals that a triangular axis of military support contributes to and benefits each country's capabilities in their regional security environments. Iran's exports of drone technologies to Russia have diffused through Russia and into North Korea, creating an illicit network that would otherwise be under sanctions regimes. Simultaneously, North Korea has supplied Russia with artillery, manpower, and diplomatic support while receiving advanced technology, training, and operational experience from the war in Ukraine. Russia, in turn, acts as the central node of this network by redistributing both technology and regime lessons to its partners.

This complex partnership results in a self-reinforcing military ecosystem that evolves beyond simple arms transfers into joint production, doctrinal learning, and allied elements between each of the three states. This triangular structure allows each state to offset its individual weaknesses: Iran

provides low-cost strike technology, Russia contributes combat experience and scaling, and North Korea offers industrial resilience and munitions knowledge.

When looking at a broader picture, North Korea's role is not confined to supporting Iran or Russia independently. North Korea is part of a broader system that amplifies the effectiveness of the other three. North Korea is the longest-sanctioned partner of the three, and its geographic security landscape has given North Korea a uniquely strong insight into how to divert Western resources across Eurasia. The axis that North Korea is involved in pressures the United States and its allies by linking regional theaters that were once viewed as separate conflicts. The growing integration of this axis suggests that North Korea is a heavily neglected actor in the Eurasian security scene. The cooperation between all three states also suggests that cross-theater collaboration can continue as North Korea helps embed these illicit networks. North Korean compliance flies under the radar as two massive wars are raging, which can signal that North Korea's influence is likely to remain in place on both wars. It will also complicate deterrence, stretch allied resources, and accelerate military innovation across adversarial states.

Conclusion

North Korea is playing an influential role in two massive regional wars that make it a neglected but key enabler of a transregional system of low-cost warfare. North Korea's support of Russia through munitions, power, and industrial output, and cooperation of Iranian missile and aerial capabilities threatens to link disconnected theaters into a mutually prospering network of arms trade. The triangular axis that is created results in each other's weaknesses being smoothed out while collectively imposing costs on the United States and its allies throughout Eurasia. Because of this, deterrence and high-technology arms advantage are slowly being eroded across the Middle East and Eastern Europe. By recognizing North Korea as a central node in this evolving relationship, regional states are better able to understand emerging challenges posed by illicit and transcontinental arms and economic strategies.