North Korea troop deployment locks in Russia military alliance

AFP – North Korea's decision to deploy thousands of soldiers to Ukraine's front lines cements Pyongyang's contentious military alliance with Moscow, experts told AFP, and pulls Russia deeper into Korean peninsula security.

About 1,500 North Korean special forces soldiers are already in Russia acclimatising, likely to head to the front lines soon, Seoul's spy agency said Friday, with thousands more troops set to depart imminently, Pyongyang's first such deployment overseas.

The move demonstrates that the military deal signed by the North's Kim Jong Un and Russian President Vladimir Putin in June, which included a mutual defence clause, was not just for show.

"This establishes a framework where Russia's intervention or military support will automatically occur if North Korea is attacked or faces a crisis," Hong Min, a senior analyst at the Korea Institute for National Unification, told AFP.

The fact that North Korean soldiers will fight alongside Russia in Ukraine proves how "solid" the Putin-Kim deal really is, Hong said.

And the boost of troops from Pyongyang could help Moscow to hold "occupied territories or aid in further territorial gains", he added.

North and South Korea remain technically at war as the 1950 to 1953 conflict ended with an armistice, not a peace deal. But while Kim has built up a nuclear arsenal, Seoul lacks nukes of

its own.

The South is protected by the so-called US nuclear umbrella, and Seoul and Washington routinely conduct large-scale joint military drills, which infuriate Pyongyang.

By sending troops to Russia, Kim could be hoping to create a more integrated North Korean and Russian military deterrent, akin to the US-South Korea alliance, potentially "resulting in a significant shift" in the Koreas' security dynamics, Hong said.

— 'Significant shift' —

Ukraine's state-run Centre for Strategic Communication on Friday released a video that purportedly shows North Korean soldiers in what looks like a Russian military camp preparing to join Moscow's war in Ukraine.

In the footage, one of the soldiers appeared to say "move over" to his colleagues with a North Korean accent.

Seoul's spy agency told AFP that it was "inappropriate" for them to comment on materials released by another country's government.

Experts said the deployment gives North Korea's elite soldiers a chance to experience modern warfare, and see how the country's home-grown weaponry — which Seoul has long accused Kim of sending to Russia — fares on the battlefield.

It could also be a bid by Kim to enhance his international stature and negotiating position ahead of the US elections next month, Lee Sang-min, a researcher at Korea Institute for Defense Analyses, told AFP.

"One way to attract global attention by doing something reprehensible is by sending troops to support the war in Ukraine, which could prolong the conflict or shift it in Russia's favour," he said.

– War economy –

For Russia, the benefit of the North Korean deployment is clear, said Vladimir Tikhonov, professor of Korea studies at the University of Oslo.

“Russia’s main bottleneck is shortage of both military and labour manpower, and North Korea has a great unexplored potential to alleviate both,” he told AFP.

Relations between the two Koreas are at one of their lowest points in years, with Kim on Thursday stressing the country had jettisoned the “unreasonable idea of reunification”.

Experts said Pyongyang could also be using Ukraine as a means of re-aligning its foreign policy.

By sending soldiers, North Korea is positioning itself within the Russian war economy as a supplier of weapons, military support and labour – potentially even bypassing its traditional ally, neighbour and main trading partner, China, according to analysts.

“It means that Pyongyang won’t be motivated to seek improvements in relations with Japan, South Korea and the US,” Tikhonov said.

“It means a constant state of tension on the Korean Peninsula.”

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