

South Korea major supplier of shells to Ukraine

Ben McGrath**10 December 2023**

South Korea has become a major supplier of munitions to Ukraine this year, according to a recent article in the *Washington Post*. The revelation confirms similar reports earlier this year and contradicts claims by the right-wing Yoon Suk-yeol administration in Seoul that it is providing only so-called “non-lethal” aid to the far-right regime in Kiev.

The December 4 article in which the disclosure appears deals with the preparation and disputes between US war planners and their proxies in the Ukrainian government and military in conducting this year’s failed offensive against Russia. The *Post* spoke with more than 30 senior officials from the US, Ukraine and other European countries. South Korean officials have not directly denied the report though they have attempted to downplay it.

Washington has targeted Russia and China as the primary obstacles to its global hegemony. Stoked by US imperialism in the hope it would lead to the dismembering of Russia, the Ukraine war has now raged on for nearly two years. The Biden administration and NATO have turned the Ukrainian population into cannon fodder and armed its military to the teeth to ensure that the war continues.

Seeking to augment Ukraine’s stockpile of shells to conduct the failed offensive that commenced in June, Washington began stepping up pressure on Seoul to provide 155mm shells following a February 3 meeting overseen by US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan, according to the *Post*. At the same time, the US, the United Kingdom and Germany were preparing to provide Kiev with armoured vehicles and tanks.

Seoul officials were reportedly receptive to the plan so long as they could claim the provision of shells was “indirect.” The report continued: “The shells began to flow at the beginning of the year, eventually making

South Korea a larger supplier of artillery ammunition for Ukraine than all European nations combined.”

South Korea’s arming of Ukraine is largely buried within the *Post*’s report and several questions are left unanswered, including the exact number of shells supplied and how they were delivered. The report writes that the US military believed that the number of shells Ukraine needed would be “90,000 or more a month.” The article added: “The Pentagon calculated that about 330,000 155mm shells could be transferred by air and sea within 41 days if Seoul could be persuaded.”

Subsequently, South Korea’s *Hankyoreh* newspaper reported on December 5 that Seoul has sent the US at least 500,000 shells supposedly to restock Washington’s supplies that have been reduced after arming Ukraine. An additional 100,000 shells were also sent to the US last year with the claim that these would only be for Washington’s use.

Seoul’s facilitation of the slaughter in Ukraine, as well as participation in a war that could lead to direct conflict with Russia, has taken place almost entirely behind the backs of the South Korean population. No serious debate on the matter has taken place in the National Assembly or the media. The government regularly asserts that it is only providing so-called “non-lethal” military aid to Kiev.

In response to the *Washington Post* article, South Korea’s Defense Ministry downplayed the report, claiming there was no change in its policy towards Ukraine. On December 5, ministry spokesman Jeon Hanguy stated during a press briefing, “The military has provided humanitarian aid and war supplies to defend the freedom of Ukraine. The government’s position remains unchanged.” When asked to clarify the meaning of “indirect” as mentioned by the *Post*, Jeon

did not answer, instead saying, “I believe it would be difficult for me to tell you what the exact meaning is.”

However, this is not the first time South Korea’s arming of Ukraine has been raised. Yoon first publicly addressed the possibility of supplying shells to Ukraine in an interview with Reuters in April, shortly before his summit that month with US President Joe Biden.

Moscow stated at the time that it would consider South Korea a participant in the war if it did so. Russian President Vladimir Putin and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un subsequently held a summit in September, driven together by US and South Korean aggression, which is only further raising tensions on the Korean Peninsula.

A *Wall Street Journal* report on May 24 stated that Seoul had reached an agreement to send shells to the US for transfer to Ukraine. At the time, the Defense Ministry claimed there were “inaccurate parts” in the report. Other administration officials also denied that Seoul was supplying munitions to Kiev whether directly or indirectly.

The provision of shells to Ukraine, even if indirectly, could only take place with Seoul’s active involvement. South Korea’s Foreign Trade Act bans sending military arms directly to countries at war, but it also bans its military aid from being sent to a third country without Seoul’s permission. As such, Seoul would have granted Washington approval to arm Ukraine with South Korean shells while continuing to tell the public at home that it was not doing so.

South Korea is already both a major arms producer and purchaser, with a military budget that ranks ninth in the world. Seoul’s 2023 military budget stood at \$US48.3 billion. It has become a major arms supplier, with the Yoon government intending to become the fourth largest arms exporter in the world by 2027. In 2022, military sales reached \$US17 billion, far exceeding the then-record high from the previous year of \$US7.25 billion.

Yoon has also drawn Seoul even closer to Washington since coming to power in May 2022. The president normalized relations with Japan in line with US pressure and this past August established a de facto trilateral military alliance with Washington and Tokyo aimed at China.

It is noteworthy that in the event South Korea goes to war, Washington assumes operational control

(OPCON) of the South’s military, one of the largest in the world with 500,000 active-duty personnel and 3,100,000 reservists. While negotiations have taken place for years on returning OPCON to Seoul, Yoon shot this down at the beginning of his administration, saying, “Who takes the command should be decided based on the most effective ways of winning a war, not for any causes or ideologies.”

South Korea’s involvement in the Ukraine war demonstrates that its alliance with the US has nothing to do with defending itself against North Korea, as is so often claimed. Instead, Seoul is a key component of US war planning against Russia and China. Hoping to take a share in the spoils, Seoul has signed up for these wars.



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