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Partners in crime

While North Korean troops are unlikely to be a game changer in the Russia-Ukraine War, their presence is already a major victory for Kim Jong-Un

The news of the reclusive North Korean regime sending troops to assist Putin's war against Ukraine surprised many. And yet, this move makes perfect sense when considering the numerous benefits and comparatively low costs for the regime. Even before his soldiers began fighting, Kim Jong-Un had achieved a strategic victory.

As NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte recently pointed out, Russia's military technological assistance to North Korea is valuable to Pyongyang. But there are also many other *material* benefits that North Korea can expect from Russia, in the form of cash, fuel and food. North Korean soldiers can also gain combat experience and observe how weapons from their country and other countries perform on battlefields. Many have also pointed out the prestige boost Pyongyang gains from sending troops to aid Russia.

More to gain than to lose

One benefit, however, has gone unnoticed: North Korea is creating an excellent precedent of honouring the brand-new mutual defence pact with Russia. Kim and Putin signed the comprehensive strategic partnership in June 2024. Article 4 of the treaty states that 'if one of the Parties is subjected to an armed attack by any state or several states and thus finds itself in a state of war, the other Party will immediately provide military and other assistance with all means at its disposal.' Ukraine's incursion to Russian territories began after the signing of the Russia-North Korea defence pact, and one can argue that North Korea is simply honouring their obligation.

The strengthening of the mutual defence commitment is a major advantage to North Korea even if it receives nothing more from Russia. For instance, the next time when North Korea engages in provocative actions and South Korea considers retaliation, Seoul will have to worry

not just about Pyongyang and Beijing but also what Moscow might do. Even if Russia's intervention is unlikely, the small risk of its potential acts as a deterrence against South Korea and the United States. Russia's reputation as a military protector is second-rate, and it has recently abandoned Armenia, but it is still handy as a deterrent against North Korea's adversaries.

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The strong language of the Russia-North Korea comprehensive strategic partnership is comparable to other past defence pacts (with the Soviet Union in 1961, with China in 1961, with Libya in 1982, and with Cuba in 1986). The credibility of North Korea's alliances, however, is uncertain. Many question, for example, whether China will defend North Korea despite the persistence of the Sino-North Korean defence pact. By sending troops to Russia, Kim Jong-Un has improved the credibility of Russia's security commitment, which was missing until recently, after Russia let the previous defence pact expire in 1996.

As important as these benefits are, the low cost of sending troops may be more crucial in explaining North Korea's policy. As North Korea is already isolated and under sanctions, there is not much to lose by further alienating the West and the wider international community.

Second, the risk and costs of fighting against Ukraine are limited for North Korea. Ukraine is not a US ally, and neither does it have a special relationship with the United States unlike Israel or Taiwan. Ukraine itself has limited means of retaliating against North Korea due to the large geographic distance.

Third, losing the soldiers in the battlefield likely matters less to the Kim regime than to most governments of the world, and it also matters little to the military balance on the Korean Peninsula. North Korea is hopelessly outmatched by its adversaries in conventional military capabilities. And still, even if 12 000 North Korean soldiers are killed in Russia or Ukraine, that is only around one per cent of North Korea's active military personnel. More importantly, North Korea cannot compete against South Korea and the United States with conventional weapons. Losing even a sizable number of troops, therefore, may be militarily inconsequential.

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admittedly not an easy task, and the current generation of North Koreans have very little international experience. There is a distinct possibility that North Korean troops will suffer an embarrassing defeat, especially given the likely lack of interoperability or communication with the Russian military.

North Korea, however, has extensive experience of militarily assisting other countries, even in remote regions of the world. During the Iran-Iraq war, for example, Iran imported large quantities of arms and military personnel from North Korea. A North Korean defector, albeit likely with exaggeration, claimed that thousands of North Korean military personnel worked for Iran in the war. Although North Korean troops are unlikely to become a game changer in the Russia-Ukraine War, it is imprudent to dismiss them as cannon fodder for Russia.

Regardless of what North Korean soldiers achieve in the battlefield, the attention they have received from global media is already a major victory for Kim Jong-Un. My conversations with South Korean experts and policymakers underscore this initial victory. They invariably worry about what North Korea will receive from Russia. Sending troops is an important demonstration of commitment, and it has created expectations of Russian support to North Korea among observers. Thus, by sending troops to Russia, Kim Jong-Un has already enhanced North Korea's deterrence against its adversaries.



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