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THE PENINSULA

The Mutual Defense Treaty With North Korea May Backfire on Russia

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Russian President Vladimir Putin has a very short list of countries on his list of available international travel destinations these days. He made a wise choice to travel to Pyongyang, where he could be feted as a fellow dictator and share relief from sanctions-imposed isolation. However, Putin's decision to sign a comprehensive mutual defense pact with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un may ultimately be an own-goal rather than a strategic breakthrough, if indeed the South Korean government follows through on its pledge to transition from backfilling US and Polish stockpiles to directly providing military support to Ukraine.

Putin likely thought his visit to Pyongyang would reinforce South Korean paralysis regarding overt military support for Ukraine while expanding the scope and types of North Korean munitions available for Russia's war efforts. The North Korea-Russia relationship has flowered in recent months to include shared condemnation of perceived US imperialism, as well as Russia's action to pull the plug on the UN Panel of Experts charged with investigating and recommending international sanctions for North Korean violations of unanimous resolutions against its nuclear and missile proliferation activities. Despite these developments, South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol stated his desire to maintain "as smooth as possible" relations with Russia at a press conference on May 9 and reaffirmed South Korea's policy of not providing military weaponry directly to Ukraine.

South Korea's rhetorical overtures prior to the Kim-Putin summit generated many questions regarding South Korea's reliability as a like-minded partner from EU and British diplomatic representatives with whom I had conversations a week prior to Putin's visit. In particular, my interlocutors underscored both Europe's priority of ensuring South Korean solidarity in supporting Ukraine and its disappointment with South Korea's tepid rhetorical support especially compared with that of Japan. European interlocutors asked why there was not more visible pressure from the United States to bring South Korea into greater alignment with the West toward the war in Ukraine.

South Korea's initial reaction to the announcement of a North Korea-Russia mutual defense treaty suggests that the development may serve to erase European concerns by galvanizing the Yoon administration to provide direct support to Ukraine in urgent areas such as anti-missile systems and direct munition supplies. South Korea's demarche of the Russian Ambassador to South Korea Georgy Zinoviev following the announcement included demands for Russia to end military ties with North Korea. However, the summon also drew a general warning from Putin that it would be a "very big mistake" if South Korea follows through on its threat to directly supply munitions to Ukraine.

Putin's ambiguous comment points to a major effect of the signing of the mutual defense pact that both North Korea and Russia may desire to exploit and that South Korea will now have to navigate: the reconnection of conflict risks on the Korean Peninsula to the broader strategic environment and global geopolitical rivalries. A consequence is that South Korean actions against Russia will have to take into account the possibility that Russia will retaliate by accelerating the scope and depth of military cooperation with North Korea, including the provision of advanced satellite and ballistic missile technologies. Indeed, a possible Russian motive behind the signing of the mutual defense treaty with North Korea could be to open up the possibility of a second front for a military conflict beyond Ukraine, both as a means by which to induce South Korean caution regarding export of military equipment to Ukraine and to signal the possibility of a broadened conflict that would also have ramifications for US global military strategy.

The Yoon administration will have to navigate these risks by closing the gap in perception and approach with like-minded European allies and by further strengthening US-Japan-South Korean military coordination in response to closer North Korea-Russia ties. In this respect, the timing of Putin's visit to Pyongyang will invite attention and a unified response from NATO's 75th anniversary commemorations in Washington, DC, and from the American, Japanese, and South Korean leaders on the sidelines of those meetings.

Scott Snyder is author of The U.S.-South Korea Alliance: Why It May Fail and Why It Must Not. He is President and CEO of the Korea Economic Institute of America (KEI).

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