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THE RUSSIA-UKRAINE WAR AND THE DPRK: ROK AND ALLIED RESPONSES

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The world is carefully watching the development in Ukraine wondering how its lessons might be applied to other regions of strategic importance to the great powers. South Korea has historically been cautious about responding to regional issues when they involve its specific economic interests while simultaneously following principled approaches in a way that does not fully satisfy demands and expectations of the United States.

However, after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, South Korea quickly took actions to align with United States in imposing sanctions on Moscow.¹ North Korea in turn was quick to denounce what it saw as the US role in heightening tensions in Ukraine. Pyongyang's Ministry of Foreign Affairs criticized Washington, accusing it of "rejecting Moscow's legitimate demand while stubbornly insisting that it can never abandon NATO's open-door policy."² On 17 March, marking the 73rd anniversary of the signing of an agreement on economic and cultural cooperation with the then-Soviet Union, North Korea vowed to strengthen its support and solidarity in cooperation with Russia.³ Pyongyang's was one of only five governments that voted against a resolution condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine at the UN headquarters on 2 March.

It is argued that a new Cold War with the United States, Japan, and South Korea on the one side and Russia, China, and North Korea on the other is growing due to the Ukraine crisis.⁴ President Joe Biden's first

State of the Union speech on 1 March indicated that global ideological confrontation is back. He declared that "freedom will always triumph over tyranny," when he reiterated his stance in the fight between democracy and dictatorship. Although the United States is driving enormous measures to push Russia out of the global economy and multilateral institutions, no short-term end to the fighting is in sight. While the world community focuses on Ukraine, tensions on the Korean Peninsula are increasing daily, which can inevitably cause dynamic shifts among states in East Asia.

NARRATIVES OF INVASION

The key question is whether the escalation of tensions on the Korean Peninsula was a foreseen development or was triggered by the Ukraine crisis. The Russian invasion happened around the same time as North Korea's declaration of ending its moratorium on testing nuclear weapons and inter-continental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), causing experts to examine the linkage between the two events. It has been four years since North Korea threatened not to attend any dialogue with the US.⁵ However, those who think the present war in Ukraine likely sparked new tensions in Korea argue that North Korea will become more accepting of risk than before and follow Russia's lead.⁶

A related question is how the Russian invasion of Ukraine has changed North Korea's strategic calculus and how it poses a challenge to the new South Korean government's ability to handle inter-Korean relations. Undoubtedly, North Korea will pay attention to how the Ukraine crisis unfolds with respect to the escalation between the United States and Russia. There are at least three scenarios.

¹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Korean Government's Decision on Additional Financial Sanctions against Russia," Press Releases, March 7, 2022, available at https://www.mofa.go.kr/eng/brd/m_5676/view.do?seq=322012.

² David Choi, "North Korea comes to Russia's defense over Ukraine conflict," *Stars and Stripes*, February 11, 2022.

³ United Nations, "General Assembly resolution demands end to Russian offensive in Ukraine," UN News, March 2, 2022.

⁴ Gil Yun-hyung "Korea's new president and the coming new Cold War," *Hankyoreh*, March 10, 2022, available at https://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/english_editorials/1034335.html.

⁵ Elizabeth Saunders, "This is why North Korea reacted so strongly to Bolton's mention of the Libya model," *Washington Post*, May 17, 2018.

⁶ Josh Rogin, "Kim Jong Un is adopting Putin's Ukraine playbook," *Washington Post*, April 28, 2022, available at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2022/04/28/north-korea-kim-jong-un-adopts-putin-playbook-ukraine/>.

First, Russia's revisionist move could convince North Korea that a nuclear-armed state can revise or erase an existing national border as it wishes.⁷ The basic premise is the simple truth that North Korea is also a nuclear-armed state with revisionist aspirations toward South Korea. This makes it become more likely that Pyongyang will employ nuclear threats to influence Washington's foreign policy. With global attention directed to Eastern Europe, North Korea may find itself slipping down the list of international priorities. Consequently, emboldened by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, it may want to reverse this trend by increasing the level of provocation with intensive tests of ICBM and nuclear weapons. This scenario can also include nuclear blackmailing to extract political concessions from the United States and its allies in Northeast Asia.

Second, Russia's isolation from the international community can provide an opportunity for North Korea to increase its strategic value to its traditional ally. Historically, Pyongyang has extracted "friendship prices" from both Moscow and Beijing in terms of economic and political benefits. In the 1960s, North Korea skillfully avoided being embroiled in the Sino-Soviet split but rather encouraged competition between the two Communist powers in providing economic and military assistance to Kim Il Sung. North Korea explained that Kim Jong-un's Byeongjin line – that pursues parallel development of economy and nuclear capabilities – followed the strategy of the Kim Il Sung era of simultaneously promoting the economy and national defense.⁸

At a time when the support for national defense construction is much needed,

⁷ Scott A. Snyder, "Russia's Invasion of Ukraine and Implications for the Korean Peninsula," *Asia Bound*, March 8, 2022, available at <https://www.cfr.org/blog/russias-invasion-ukraine-and-implications-korean-peninsula>.

⁸ "Byungjin's victory gunfire goes forward," Rodong Shinmun, April 21, 2013; Hyun Sook Jung, "A Study on the Origin of Nuclear Armed Forces in the Kim Jong Un Era: Focused on "Nuclear force Construction" in Kim Il-sung's Era," *Journal of Korean Politics*, Vol 28, No. 3 (2019): 113-138.

North Korea can revive its old strategy. This scenario includes revitalizing the trade of banned items of strategic and commercial value.⁹ Since the United States and its European allies are pre-occupied with the situation in Ukraine, North Korea may see it likely to reduce the costs of violating sanctions. Being on Russia's side, it can expect to be defended against serious consequences from the UN Security Council. In this vein, North Korea is likely to see that the current fighting over Ukraine will benefit its regime to pursue its interests even more resolutely and successfully.

Third, the first reaction of North Korea experts after the beginning of the Ukraine crisis is that it will strengthen North Korea's willingness to possess nuclear weapons. To Pyongyang, the case of Ukraine is an attack on a minor power that is paying the price of abandoning its weapons of mass destruction.¹⁰ Therefore, it is argued that North Korea is now more determined than ever to keep its nuclear arsenal.¹¹ The difference from the first scenario is that even if North Korea does not take offensive action, international public opinion will naturally flow in the direction of accepting North Korea's nuclear status. Making North Korea's possession of atomic weapons a fait accompli would be a significant change in the international community's perception and discourse. Those concerned about the risks of regional nuclear proliferation even argue that the war in Ukraine will naturally cause the nuclear dominoes to fall in Northeast Asia.¹²

⁹ Ruediger Rank, "North Korea as a Beneficiary of the Russian Invasion of Ukraine," *Foreign Affairs*, February 24, 2022, available at <https://www.38north.org/2022/03/north-korea-as-a-beneficiary-of-the-russian-invasion-of-ukraine/>.

¹⁰ Andy Hong, "Why Ukraine Matters for the Korean Peninsula," *The Peninsula*, February 18, 2022, available at <https://keia.org/the-peninsula/why-the-ukraine-matters-for-the-korean-peninsula/>; Edward Howell "How North Korea Views the Ukraine Crisis," *The Diplomat*, March 14, 2022, available at <https://the-diplomat.com/2022/03/how-north-korea-views-the-ukraine-crisis/>.

¹¹ Choe Sang-Hun, "In South Korea, Ukraine War Revives the Nuclear Question," *New York Times*, M 6, 2022.

¹² Chung-in Moon, "How Ukraine is setting the stage for a nuclear domino effect in Northeast Asia," *Hankyoreh*, May 2, 2022.

EXAMINING THE NARRATIVE

All these arguments raise their own questions. First, Ukraine is not suitable for comparison with North Korea because the two have different contexts in terms of their capability, sunk costs, and utility of nuclear weapons. Since Ukraine had no control over the nuclear weapons it inherited from the Soviet Union, it was unreasonable to keep them at a high cost after the Cold War ended. North Korea, on the other hand, chose to invest in developing indigenously its own nuclear program for its regime survival. The so-called Ukrainian lessons¹³ may not be that instructive to North Korea at all, even though North Korea has said that it did not want to end up like other post-disarmament regimes.¹⁴

Russia took military actions against Ukraine not simply because it was easy to attack a country without nuclear weapons, but because of Kyiv's strategic value to Moscow. It is true that the invasion of Ukraine effectively nullified the Budapest Memorandum on Security Assurances, signaling the limits of multilateral diplomacy. However, it does not mean that the United States, North Korea's so-called 'arch-enemy,' would be willing to disregard international law and take unprovoked military action like Russia did. The claim that Ukraine's abandonment of its nuclear weapons was a mistake would be strategically useful for North Korea to justify its possession of nuclear weapons, but it does not serve the interest of nonproliferation supporters to agree with this logic.

Second, the argument that North Korea will be emboldened to follow Russia's lead and challenge the status quo is debatable. Ukraine and South Korea are not comparable, either. Ukraine is not a NATO member and not a treaty ally of the United States. The very existence of allied troops on the Korean peninsula is

powerful insurance against war. South Korea does not share the anxiety that no ally can come to its defense against invasion. Russia's attack on Ukraine was initiated precisely to prevent the latter from joining an alliance system, which confirms the significance of such formal agreements.

The Ukraine crisis will not undermine US alliance solidarity. Rather, it has recompacted the Western front and facilitated an emerging coalition in the Asia-Pacific. States in this region will significantly enhance their deterrence capabilities, and South Korea will surely be one of them. The allied force will seek a more future-oriented relationship by strengthening extended deterrence and broadening the scope of military cooperation. This can affect North Korea's calculations about the utility of high-profile provocation: higher costs and lower returns.

Third, the argument that the Ukraine crisis will enable North Korea to benefit from regional nuclear development does not reflect the reality. There is a tendency to exaggerate the reactions of South Korea and Japan to the fate of countries that have given up their nuclear weapons. The recent events in Ukraine may shift public opinion in favor of going nuclear but not the political considerations of associated risks and costs such as sanctions and diplomatic isolation.

A nuclear-armed Seoul and Tokyo would have tremendous implications for Beijing. The cost of internal balancing through arming itself with nuclear weapons is an increase of China risk. It is difficult to imagine a scenario under which the United States supports regional nuclear proliferation, not only because it would severely damage the nonproliferation regime but also because of entrapment concerns—risk of being dragged into an unwanted conflict.

The United States will respond firmly to the North Korean threat, but it will be less willing to risk confrontation with China because of its own allies' nuclear ambitions. Public opinion polls on South

¹³ Doug Bandow, "A Lesson for North Korea: Ukraine Gave Up Its Nukes and Was Invaded," *The National Interest*, March 7, 2022.

¹⁴ Ruediger Rank, "Libyan Lessons for North Korea: A case of Déjà vu," 38 NORTH, March 21, 2011, available at <https://www.38north.org/2011/03/libyan-lessons-for-north-korea/>.

Korea's nuclear weapons development show that a majority of respondents support nuclear armament, which is often quoted by experts in Washington to warn of regional nuclear proliferation.¹⁵

However, studies show that respondents abandon their support for nuclear armament when they are exposed to more information about the economic and political costs such as international sanctions and weakening of US security guarantees.¹⁶ Calls for nuclear armament have not become a part of a mainstream political movement in South Korea for decades and are not likely to be in the near term.

Fourth, many experts predict that a readjustment of North Korea's nuclear doctrine will naturally follow, which nonetheless needs careful examination. Independent of the Ukraine crisis, North Korea's nuclear strategy has evolved from minimum deterrence (which pursues retaliatory strike capability) to limited deterrence (warfighting strategy to allow flexibility in the use of nuclear weapons) according to the changes in the geostrategic landscape and advancement of its nuclear program.

With the testing of diverse means of delivery systems and miniaturization of nuclear warheads, North Korea's rhetoric on the utility of nuclear weapons has changed gradually. Until 2015, North Korea talked about the nuclear doctrine of retaliatory deterrence to emphasize its 'right' to use nuclear weapons to prevent a war.¹⁷ The fourth nuclear test in January 2016, the multiple missile launches that subsequently followed, and the fiery war of words between Trump and Kim had an impact on North Korea's discourse on its nuclear strategy. In May that year, North

Korea already warned that it would use nuclear weapons if its sovereignty was infringed (it did not make any distinction between political and territorial sovereignty).

At the military parades in October 2020 and January 2021, North Korea unveiled the missiles moving together with the strategic force's subordinate echelons, indicating that these weapons systems will be operated in an integrated manner with combat forces. Because North Korea's tactical weapons are still in the early stages of development and strategic assets have not yet been deployed, much will be dependent on the future interactions between North Korea and the rest of the world.

POLICY CONSIDERATIONS FOR SOUTH KOREA

Anxiety as to whether the United States will come to the aid of South Korea in the event of military confrontation with North Korea would increase if the alliance partnership weakens. North Korea always looks for cracks in the US-led alliance system, but the reality shows otherwise. At their summit in May 2021, the United States and South Korea declared the intention to reinvigorate and modernize their ties with a shared vision for a region governed by democratic norms and the rule of law.¹⁸

Broadening the scope of cooperation into areas of leading innovation including clean energy, artificial intelligence, next-generation communications networks, civilian space exploration, and other emerging technologies will further deepen the interdependency of the two allies so that the new government in South Korea can facilitate collaboration to meet pressing challenges in Northeast Asia and beyond.

¹⁵ Jenny Town, presentation at the National Committee on North Korea Forum, From Moscow to Pyongyang: Implications of the Ukrainian Invasion for the Korean Peninsula, Washington DC, March 23, 2022.

¹⁶ Sangyon Son and Park Jong Hee, "Do South Korean Voters Really Want Nuclear Armament?" *Korean Political Science Review*, Vol 54, No. 2 (2020): 175-204.

¹⁷ Jina Kim, "No First Use Policy of a New Nuclear Weapons State: The Case of North Korea," in Prakash Menon and Adita Ramanathan eds., *The Sheathed Sword: From Nuclear Brink to No First Use* (London: Bloomsbury, 2022).

¹⁸ White House, US-ROK Leaders' Joint Statement, Washington DC, May 21, 2021.

It should be noted that President Yoon has expressed interest in joining the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue and contributing to its working groups.¹⁹ At a time when the United States needs to bring in other partners into a Quad-plus formation to deal with regional problems, South Korea will review gains from increasing its strategic value to the US-led international coalition.

Policy considerations for South Korea include the following. First, South Korea's position of strategic ambiguity between competing great powers will be increasingly untenable. What we are witnessing in Europe today is not just a power competition, but the decline of the existing order. The troublesome projection of military power by Russia will continue to unite those who wish to preserve an international order based on liberal rules. Even ASEAN, known for its principle of non-interference and neutrality, put out a statement condemning the Russian invasion.²⁰

South Korea is expected to advocate strongly for coherent action against any attempts undermining a rules-based order in the Asia-Pacific region. This may include building support for a Taiwan contingency. Therefore, close consultations between South Korea and the United States on when and how to bear a burden on behalf of the alliance can follow.

Second, a prudent response to any North Korean threats is the approach that the new government in Seoul should take. North Korea broke its self-imposed moratorium after more than a four-year hiatus and fired an ICBM, which could be repeated if there is a technical necessity. Before Moscow's aggression against Ukraine, North Korea warned it may resume ICBM tests at the 6th Political

Bureau Meeting of the 8th Central Committee of the Korean Workers' Party on 19 January 2022. If North Korea wants to demonstrate that it has mastered ICBM technology that can enable a warhead to re-enter the Earth's atmosphere and hit targets with much accuracy, additional tests would be inevitable to dispel doubts about the credibility of such a claim. Considering North Korea's missile tests as a constant, it is desirable to formulate a long-term plan rather than reacting spontaneously each time. In particular, emotion-charged rhetoric such as talk of preemptive strikes help the North increase escalation and justify further military actions, and therefore should be avoided.

Third, alliance modernization will be a necessary component for the future security cooperation mechanism. The United States will face difficult trade-offs between competing priorities in formulating its military posture in Europe and Asia. Therefore, the United States will expect more contributions from its Asia-Pacific allies to execute an effective multi-theatre strategy in an era of great-power rivalry.

US efforts to mobilize hard power in a unified front can be pursued in parallel with South Korea's force enhancement plans that aim to ensure its armed forces strengthen South Korea-led warfighting capabilities and establish an omnidirectional military readiness in support of regional stability. South Korea should ensure the smooth progress of its defense reform in a way to develop its alliance with the United States into a mutually complementary relationship. It should also contribute to international peace through actively joining international coordination, overseas deployments, and out-of-area operations.

¹⁹ "Yoon says will 'positively review joining' Quad if invited," *The Korea Herald*, April 26, 2022; "Yoon asks for Australia's support over Quad working groups," *Yonhap News*, May 3, 2022.

²⁰ ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Statement Calling for a Ceasefire in Ukraine, March 3, 2022, available at <https://asean.org/asean-foreign-ministers-statement-calling-for-a-ceasefire-in-ukraine/>.

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The **Asia-Pacific Leadership Network for Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament (APLN)** is a network of political, military, and diplomatic leaders from countries across the Asia-Pacific tackling security and defence challenges with a particular focus on addressing and eliminating nuclear weapon risks.



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