Despite being thousands of miles apart, the Korean Peninsula and Ukraine share a land border with Russia. Given their respective ties to Moscow, both South and North Korean governments have toed around the sidelines of the Ukraine crisis—with Seoul publicly supporting a diplomatic solution while quietly considering additional humanitarian aid to Kyiv, and Pyongyang issuing a rather tepid criticism of the United States’ “hostile policy for isolating and weakening” Russia.
But no matter their immediate posture, the Ukraine crisis has already informed new realities on the future of security on the Korean Peninsula: the further undermining of denuclearization efforts in North Korea, and the narrowing margins of action for South Korea amid an accelerated calcification of alliance structures.

**The Undermining of Denuclearization Efforts**

Contrary to the popular notion of North Korea as a hermit kingdom, Pyongyang has long kept close tabs on international affairs, both near and far. What their observations have revealed regarding the fates of denuclearized minor powers, then, have augured troubling conclusions.

In 2018, North Korea threatened to walk away from the Singapore Summit in response to then-national security adviser John Bolton's support for a “Libya model” of nuclear disarmament. This was a reference to Libya's abandonment of its nuclear program in 2003 in exchange for the lifting of sanctions. While Bolton may have been focusing on a similar package of economic incentives and acceptance into the international community for North Korea, Pyongyang clearly signaled that it did not want to be compared to the post-disarmament Gadhafi regime that was deposed by rebels with assistance of NATO firepower.

In 1991, Ukraine inherited roughly 5,000 strategic and tactical nuclear weapons from the Soviet Union after its collapse, which made it the third largest nuclear power after the United States and Russia. Ukraine ultimately traded its vast stockpile for security guarantees of Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity in the 1994 Budapest Memorandum, which was co-signed with the United States and Russia. Now nearly a decade into a low-grade state of war with Russia, some in Ukraine look back upon the agreement with regret: in April 2021, Ukrainian ambassador to Germany Andriy Melnyk suggested that Kyiv might return to nuclear armament if it cannot secure NATO accession.

To North Korea, the Ukraine is another case study in a minor power that had abandoned its weapons of mass destruction and is now paying the price of nonproliferation in the realm of great power politics. Moreover, asking great powers to guarantee its security—whether Russia, China, or the United States—remains anathema to North Korea's principal national security doctrine. Russia's incursions into Ukraine may further reaffirm...
Pyongyang's suspicions that these multilateral agreements are insufficient to deter the foreign policy objectives of those powers who are paradoxically often leaned on to be global watchmen.

While geopolitical realities confronting North Korea are different from that of Ukraine, the crisis has rendered the process of a negotiated nuclear nonproliferation far more tenuous – not only because Pyongyang will be more wary of denuclearization specifically, but also because multilateral commitments have proven to be hollow.

**Increased Tensions on U.S.-led Alliances**

The Kremlin has a long history of playing the role of a well-informed and largely independent player that sought to remain separate from Beijing's ambitions in the Far East, generally preferring to balance its disapproval of U.S. policy with its firm opposition to North Korean weapons development. It is true that the Kremlin-Beijing cooperation on frustrating Washington's efforts to place effective pressure on Pyongyang predates the Ukraine crisis; however, the latest Russo-Sino move to block a U.S. effort to impose new UN Security Council sanctions on Pyongyang on January 20, 2022 raises important questions of a potential return to a Cold War dynamic between great-power interests in East Asia. Should tensions from the Ukraine further deepen Russo-Sino cooperation as a counterweight to U.S.-led alliances, the reemergence of fault lines in Northeast Asia could accelerate, thereby forcing allies to confront misalignments in their regional policies and risking potential fractures.

Seoul is keenly aware of the dangers of a new Cold War. The Korea Institute for International Economic Policy (KIEP) warned as early as February 4 that South Korea should be wary of the formation of a cold-war structure between Russia and the United States as a result of the Ukraine crisis and its imminent danger to the Moon Administration's engagements with North and Central Asian countries. But why should this be particularly worrisome to South Korea?

At a time when China's increased coercion is testing security commitments in East Asia, Moscow's latest gambit is another straw on the back of the laden camel of the U.S.-led alliance network. We can be sure that Beijing has been closely studying the U.S.-led response to the Ukraine crisis. Whether or not the Ukraine spirals into an open conflict, the measure of U.S. and allied commitment to a non-allied partner—the influx of material; the
ability to mobilize hard power in a unified front; and the maintenance of alliance unity despite intense sanctions and decoupling which would inevitably result in collateral damage to friendly markets—will inform China’s outlook on its own ability to apply greater pressure on smaller actors on the Korean Peninsula, the Taiwan Strait, the South China Sea, and beyond.

Albeit rather reactively, the United States has also grown more assertive in marshalling its network of regional allies and partners. Australia was made privy to nuclear submarine secrets; Japan controversially expressed the growing consensus in Tokyo that Taiwan must be protected “as a democratic country,” and President Joe Biden departed from longstanding U.S. policy of ambiguity to suggest that the United States would move to defend Taiwan should China attack—a statement that garnered much unease and would subsequently be walked back. More recently, the White House released on February 11 a 19-page report titled “Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States,” which emphasized a focus on collective capacity and trilateral cooperation with Seoul and Tokyo. Then on February 12, Secretary of State Antony Blinken, South Korean Foreign Minister Chung Eui-yong, and Japanese Foreign Minister Yoshimasa Hayashi met in Hawaii to discuss continued North Korean missile tests as well as to demonstrate solidarity against Russian escalation in Ukraine.

Within this Cold War dynamic, South Korea’s position of strategic ambiguity between competing great power interests grows increasingly untenable. Heavily dependent on commerce with China and still cautious from Beijing’s retaliation over the deployment of the THAAD missile defense system, South Korea is no stranger to strong-armed coercion from China. Yet up to this point, South Korea had successfully tamped down U.S. propositions for overt cooperation on issues that would put Seoul at direct odds with Beijing. For example on Taiwan, the May 2021 Biden-Moon summit was the first time that the Taiwan issue was ever included in a joint statement between the United States and South Korea; but in a domestic briefing, the South Korean Foreign Minister reiterated that Seoul’s noncommittal stance on Taiwan had not changed.

Should a deeper fracture form between the burgeoning China-Russia partnership and the United States, Seoul will see its sovereign agency shrink. The question is not so much whether Seoul will stand with Washington, but rather how much the United States will ask South Korea to sacrifice on behalf of the alliance. While South Korea is moving to
deleverage its reliance on commerce with China and form closer ties with members of the Quad, demands from Washington to accelerate these realignments in response to provocations from Moscow or Beijing could raise costs for Seoul and generate tensions within the alliance.

Whether by kneecapping already-fragile hopes for nuclear disarmament in North Korea or deepening South Korea’s perilous geopolitical position, the Ukraine crisis has already significantly altered the calculus of security policy on the Korean Peninsula. Leaders and experts invested in Korea and the Indo-Pacific region at large would therefore be remiss to ignore the implications of the Ukraine crisis merely for its geographical distance.

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