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Russia's Invasion of Ukraine and China–North Korea Relations

Stronger Weak–Great Power Alignment

ABSTRACT

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has had repercussions in regions beyond Europe. One of these regions is Asia, including Northeast Asia. This region is home to China and North Korea, two authoritarian countries often lumped together with Russia as potential threats to the liberal international order. The relationship between China and North Korea has thus been affected by Russia's aggression toward Ukraine. Beijing and Pyongyang share a decades-old alliance. Despite its ups and downs, the alliance survives as of 2022. Russia's actions in Ukraine have only reinforced it, bringing China and North Korea closer to each other. Both of them have sided with Moscow, and for similar reasons, including their opposition to what they see as the US's and NATO's aggressive stance. And both have taken the same actions to support Russia, further strengthening their connection.

KEYWORDS: China, North Korea, United Nations, great power, weak power

1. INTRODUCTION

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has upended the regional order in Europe. Led by the US, NATO and European countries have been providing military, economic, and diplomatic support to Ukraine from the onset of the conflict. But the ramifications of Russia's actions extend beyond Europe. Asian

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countries including Japan, Singapore, South Korea, and Taiwan have joined the US and European countries in their opposition to Russia's invasion, including through economic sanctions. These countries seem to be concerned with the ramifications of the conflict for the geopolitics of Asia and the Indo-Pacific. For the war in Ukraine has implications for these regions as well.

This article analyzes the impact of the war in Ukraine on the relationship between China and North Korea. These two countries are commonly lumped together with Russia in a group of "authoritarian" regimes bent on upending a liberal international order that, it is generally assumed, does not suit them. Indeed, it is undeniable that China, North Korea, and Russia have cordial relations among them and also share certain goals and interests. Furthermore, countries and leaders arguing that Ukraine's present could be East Asia's future explicitly or implicitly have China's potential invasion of Taiwan in mind. North Korea, meanwhile, has long been seen as the biggest threat to the nuclear nonproliferation regime in Northeast Asia and beyond. In other words, Russia's invasion of Ukraine matters for China, and North Korea, and the relationship between them.

In the case of China, the war in Ukraine matters for several reasons. But three stand out. To begin with, in February 2022 Beijing and Moscow upgraded their relationship to a "no limits" partnership (President of Russia 2022). This means that, in theory, they support each other's foreign policy initiatives and actions, irrespective of their content. China is also Russia's closest ally in the UN Security Council, with the two often voting together. Since the war in Ukraine has been discussed at the UN level, China has been involved in that discussion. Finally, the practicalities of Russia's invasion of Ukraine hold lessons were China to consider doing the same with Taiwan. Moscow's actions thus have practical implications for Beijing.

To North Korea, Russia's invasion of Ukraine matters primarily for two reasons. To start with, Moscow has been a staunch supporter of Pyongyang's justifications of its missile tests, the (in)adequacy of sanctions on the Kim Jong-un regime, and the need for dialogue to deal with the North Korean nuclear issue (President of Russia 2019). Thus, Russia has been a powerful partner for North Korea, and a degree of reciprocity might be expected. North Korea has also been targeted by sanctions and condemnation by the US and its partners in the same way as Russia has been targeted, most recently

following its invasion of Ukraine. Thus there is some similarity and solidarity between them as targets of Western economic and political actions.

In this article, we analyze the impact of Russia's invasion of Ukraine on relations between China and North Korea. We argue that the war in Ukraine is leading to greater alignment between Beijing and Pyongyang for practical reasons: both side with Russia; both blame the US and NATO for the war; and both are interested in expanding cooperation. We argue that the main reason for this latter is North Korea's need to align with its senior partner, China, for support for some of its actions, such as missile tests.

Our analysis uses two main methods. First, we analyze China's and North Korea's voting records in the UN in matters related to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. UN voting is a common way to measure alignment between the positions of different countries. Second, we analyze the content of official statements on Russia's invasion of Ukraine by the Chinese and North Korean governments from February to July 2022 (i.e., from the start of the invasion to the time of writing). Official statements shed light on the position of countries in matters of foreign policy, since they have to be approved by the central authorities.

This article is organized as follows. In the next section we introduce our conceptual framework, based on weak-power alignment choices. We then provide an overview of China's and North Korea's respective positions following Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, which provides a background for understanding their response to Moscow's invasion of Ukraine in 2022. After this, we analyze Beijing's and Pyongyang's responses to the latter action. This is followed by our analysis as to how North Korea's need for long-term alignment with China is being supported by their respective responses to the war in Ukraine. The final section summarizes the key points.

2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: WEAK-POWER ALIGNMENT WITH GREAT POWERS

Our analysis of China–North Korea relations in the context of how they have been affected by Russia's invasion of Ukraine takes the perspective of weak-power alignment with great powers. The reason is twofold. First, China and North Korea have a long-standing alliance dating back to the Chinese Civil War, with North Korean troops providing support to the People's Liberation Army toward the end of the conflict, and the Korean War, when the

intervention of Chinese troops saved North Korea from being taken over by South Korea and the US-led UN forces. Ever since, and in spite of ups and downs in the bilateral relationship, China and North Korea have been aligned. This alliance was formalized in a treaty in 1961. Indeed, North Korea is China's only *de jure* ally as of 2022 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, PRC, 2021). We thus argue that both China and North Korea see international relations at least partially through the lens of their alliance—especially North Korea, which is the weaker of the two and confronted by a “hostile” US.

Second (though this is not the focus of the article), North Korea has a long-standing partnership with Russia. The Soviet Union and North Korea signed an alliance treaty in 1961. In 2000 this was replaced by a new treaty between Russia and North Korea (President of Russia 2000). The two have remained on fairly good terms. Given the strong relations between China and Russia and the deteriorating relations between Russia and the US, it makes sense for North Korea to remain aligned with both—to please Beijing but also to deter a “hostile” US, among other reasons.

North Korea is a weak power in economic and diplomatic terms. Economically, it is one of the smallest economies in Asia—and the world. Considering only Northeast Asia, it is a minnow in a region that includes three of the ten biggest economies in the world and one just outside the top twenty: China, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan (World Bank 2022). Diplomatically, North Korea falls near the bottom in indexes of diplomatic power (Lowy Institute 2019). Pyongyang's presence in multilateral institutions is usually testimonial; it is not part of powerful groups such as the G20, and it does not have diplomatic relations with the US or Japan. Even in the context of East Asia, North Korea is a secondary diplomatic actor at best, excluded from groups such as ASEAN+3, the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus, and the East Asia Summit.

There is a question as to whether North Korea can be labeled a weak military power, though. After all, it is a nuclear power and has one of the biggest standing armies in the world. Still, North Korea is a weak military power in the context of Northeast Asia—the region to which Pyongyang's foreign policy is principally directed. To start with, possession of nuclear weapons is not unusual in this region. China and Russia also have them; and Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan are protected by the US nuclear umbrella. Furthermore, China, Russia, and South Korea have a larger combination of active and reserve military personnel—and Japan and South

Korea also host US troops (International Institute for Strategic Studies 2022). Also, North Korea's military equipment and technology are outdated compared to the other countries in the region. This stems from Pyongyang's limited military budget, which is dwarfed by the budgets of all other countries in the region (Pacheco Pardo and Reeves 2014; Park 2000–01; Smith 2007). In short, North Korea is a weak military power in relative terms. And indeed, the scholars just cited have argued that its actions need to be studied from this perspective.

Alignment with great powers is a common behavior for weak powers seeking survival as an independent state. Great powers have many tools at their disposal to ensure their own survival, but weak powers do not, and throughout history they have used alignment as a crucial tool to continue to exist as independent entities. The end of bipolarity following the end of the Cold War, the unipolar moment the US enjoyed in the 1990s and early 2000s, and the emergence of bipolarity in East Asia and multipolarity at the global level have not changed the calculus for weak powers in this respect.

Weak powers seeking alignment with great powers have two options: bandwagoning with a threatening great power or balancing a threatening great power with the help of another great power. The choice depends on the seriousness of the threat they feel, the availability of another great power, and their interests and ideas. There are scholars who argue that weak powers will almost always opt for bandwagoning to diffuse the threat they feel (Fox 1959; Walt 1987). But other scholars have argued that weak powers prefer balancing, for they cannot be sure that the threatening great power will not turn against them (Labs 1992; Nuechterlein 1969). For bandwagoning can be considered a form of capitulation—and balancing, a form of confrontation (Pacheco Pardo and Reeves 2014). And most states, including weak powers, will avoid capitulation if there are alternatives. On this view, then, weak powers will choose bandwagoning if they can.

North Korea, too, faces a choice between bandwagoning and balancing. Throughout history, its choice has been the latter. Dating back to the Korean War, North Korea has felt threatened by the US, and the US–South Korea alliance, which almost obliterated it in the autumn of 1950. Since then, Pyongyang has considered Washington its enemy. And despite several attempts at bridging their differences, dating back to the 1990s, North Korea continues to treat the US as an existential threat, particularly since its invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq and its support for the Libyan rebels who

deposed Muammar Gaddafi (Korean Central News Agency 2012, 2018). Thankfully for Pyongyang, it has had readily available great powers with which to balance the US—China and the Soviet Union during the Cold War and China today—and with which it shares interests and values. And even though there have been frictions with these great powers over the decades—which continue in the case of China today—North Korea has taken the actions that were necessary to ensure that relations with these great powers continue to be at least cordial.¹

Considering all this, to understand why China–North Korea relations have strengthened during the war in Ukraine we need to recognize that Pyongyang is a weak power facing an existential threat. As such, it will engage in the behavior that is necessary to ensure that relations with its great-power ally continue to be good enough to provide protection. And this alliance is reinforced by similar interests and values.

3. BACKGROUND: CHINA, NORTH KOREA, AND RUSSIA'S ANNEXATION OF CRIMEA

Russia's invasion of Ukraine did not happen in a vacuum. Over the years, starting with Vladimir Putin, Russian leaders have claimed Ukraine as part of (Greater) Russia and rejected its status as an independent country. In the view of Putin and other Russian elites, Ukraine's independence following the collapse of the Soviet Union was unwarranted. This particularly pertains to Crimea, a peninsula that many Russians believe is an inalienable part of their country (Oskanian 2021). This is why Russia invaded and annexed Crimea in 2014. To understand China's and North Korea's responses to Russia's 2022 aggression toward Ukraine, it is instructive to briefly outline their responses to the annexation of Crimea.

China

Russo–Chinese relations have had their ups and downs since the foundation of the People's Republic of China in 1949. During the Cold War, the

1. The relationship between China and North Korea has also been labeled “a marriage of convenience” (Chung and Choi 2013). In this article, we do not make a judgement on this matter. For our argument, it suffices to say that China and North Korea have a long history of bilateral cooperation.

relationship was closer to confrontation than to cooperation.² This uneasy relationship improved after the end of the Cold War. The long-lasting border conflict between Russia and China finally ended in 1991 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, PRC, 1991), and the two countries signed a new cooperation treaty in 2001 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, PRC, 2001). China–Russia relations were officially labeled “friendly relations” in 1992, and elevated to a “constructive partnership” in 1994 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, PRC, 1994), an “equal and reliable strategic partnership” in 1996 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, PRC, 2000), and a “special partnership” in 2013 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, PRC, 2013). From the post–Cold War evolution of Sino–Russian relations it would not have been difficult to predict China’s stance toward Russia’s 2014 annexation of Crimea.

In line with their strengthening relations, China supported Moscow on this issue. China made its support for Russia’s actions clear both directly and indirectly. First, China abstained from the UN General Assembly’s vote on the 2014 Moscow-organized referendum of the Crimean people (UN Digital Library 2014a) and a 2018 resolution on the “militarization” of Crimea (UN Digital Library 2018). The Chinese government said that it abstained because the resolution would only escalate tensions between the two sides (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, PRC, 2014). Between 2019 and 2021, China consistently voted with Russia on this issue in annual UN General Assembly votes (UN Digital Library 2019, 2020, 2021). Second, China’s premier and Ministry of Foreign Affairs urged both Ukraine and Russia to show calm and restraint on the annexation issue (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, PRC, 2015). Third, China’s government-run *Global Times* pointed to the US and NATO’s eastward expansion as one of the main reasons for the Russian annexation of Crimea (Beech 2014).

North Korea

North Korea has only two treaty allies, and Russia is one of them, with relations strengthening in 2000 after Putin signed a new agreement with Kim Jong-il (Toloraya and Yakovleva 2021). Thus it was rational for North Korea to support Russia’s annexation of Crimea. In a March 2014 UN General Assembly vote on the territorial integrity of Ukraine, Pyongyang

2. For an analysis of the history of Soviet–Chinese relations, see Shen (2019).

sided with Moscow to reject the motion (UN Digital Library 2014b). And at the General Assembly, North Korea blamed the US for Russia's actions. Pyongyang argued that it was Washington's foreign policy and provocations that had forced Moscow to defend itself by invading Crimea (UN Digital Library 2014a). North Korea's official media reiterated that the US was to blame for Russia's decision to attack its neighbor and seize part of its territory (Korean Central News Agency 2016). In future years, North Korea would continue to side with Russia at the General Assembly. Between 2018 and 2021, Pyongyang sided with Moscow four times in voting against UN resolutions on the "militarization" of Crimea (UN Digital Library 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021). Essentially, North Korea was rejecting the idea that Russia had militarized what the Putin government argued was an independent territory, in which pro-independence forces were fighting against the Ukrainian government.

Meanwhile, North Korea's development of nuclear and missile programs was supported by Russia's actions in the Security Council, which helped Pyongyang bypass sanctions. Sanctions were imposed on North Korea between 2006 and 2017; but Russia was instrumental in watering them down. And from 2018 on, Russia has ensured that no new sanctions were imposed (Toloraya and Yakovleva 2021). At the same time, Russia continued to engage in trade with North Korea, provided oil to North Korea, and welcomed North Korean workers (Napalkova 2019). Sometimes this was in direct contravention of Security Council sanctions it had not been able to prevent. In other words, North Korea's support for Russia's annexation of Ukraine had benefits for the Kim regime.

4. CHINA'S RESPONSE TO RUSSIA'S INVASION OF UKRAINE

Per policies in place since 2014, China has been the only major power standing on the same side as Russia since its 2022 invasion of Ukraine. The Sino–Russian relationship was upgraded from a "special" partnership in 2013 to a "no limits" partnership in 2022 (President of Russia 2022)—just weeks before the invasion. Thus, China's support for Russia in relation to the invasion has also been stronger and more explicit than its attitudes in 2014. Very noticeably, China rejected any resolutions, sanctions, or suspensions of Russia in Security Council and General Assembly votes. Meanwhile, rather than condemning Russia, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and several

high-ranking officials pointed to the US and NATO's "expansionism" as the main cause of the war (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, PRC, 2022c). The Chinese government and state-owned enterprises continue to purchase Russian natural resources. And Chinese international relations experts and the state-controlled media have expressed their support for Russia and criticized "the West."

In particular, China abstained from voting on every resolution on the Russian invasion of Ukraine in the General Assembly, for reasons similar to those laid out in 2014 (UN Digital Library 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021). China also voted against the suspension of Russia's membership in the UN's Human Rights Council (UN Digital Library 2022d). Similar to its position following the 2014 Russian annexation of Crimea, China has insisted that the war between Russia and Ukraine is the result of complex historical and ethnic backgrounds, and that both sides should show restraint. China has also insisted that it supports dialogue, consultation, and apolitical settlement as a way to resolve the "crisis" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, PRC, 2022b).

In line with its statements at the UN, Chinese government officials have expressed support for Moscow's position on Ukraine. Spokespeople for both the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Defense have refrained from using the terms "invasion" and "war." Instead they use "crisis," "situation," and "conflict."³ In addition, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has consistently declined to answer questions related to China's support for Russia or the Chinese government's official view on the killing of civilians by the Russian armed forces. Instead, Chinese officials have pointed to the eastward expansion of the US-led NATO as a security concern for Russia and have officially opposed the economic sanctions imposed on Moscow (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, PRC, 2022e). Six months after the invasion started, the Chinese ambassador to Russia, Zhang Hanhui, reiterated the position of his government when he accused the US of forcing Moscow's hand by being "the initiator and main instigator of the Ukrainian crisis" (Reuters 2022b).

Taking a leaf from the government's position, some international relations experts and Party-related papers have echoed the ministry's logic when discussing Russia's invasion of Ukraine in essays, interviews, and articles. They have pointed to the US and NATO's geopolitical ambitions as causing

3. See press briefings and statements on the website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/).

Russia's invasion of Ukraine. They have even blamed the war on Ukraine's "pro-West" policy (Zhu 2022a). Likewise, the *Global Times* (2022) has condemned Washington's "hegemonic behaviors" and labeled the US a "war-monger" taking advantage of Ukraine's "misfortune."

On the other hand, China has offered Ukraine RMB 15 million (ca. US \$2.4 million) in aid. This makes China, the second-largest economy in the world, only the 38th-largest donor. And no aid has gone to Ukraine from China since March 2022 (Antezza et al. 2022). This very limited aid provision to Ukraine underscores China's positioning in the Russo-Ukrainian conflict in favor of Moscow. Likewise, shortly after Russia invaded Ukraine, China sought to position itself as a mediator between them. President Xi Jinping himself made this statement in a call with French president Emmanuel Macron and German chancellor Olaf Scholz (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, PRC, 2022d). However, the offer was later dropped. And Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskyy eventually asked China to use its political and economic power to "influence Russia" to stop the invasion (Chew 2022). This came six months into the invasion, suggesting that Ukraine does not believe that China has sought to put an end to Moscow's actions.

The Chinese government has allowed some internal debate on Russia's invasion of Ukraine. For example, in a domestic webinar former Chinese ambassador to Ukraine Gao Yusheng criticized Russia for "considering the Soviet Union as its exclusive sphere of influence" (quoted in Lee 2022). Meanwhile, military scholar Gong Fangbin wrote that Russia's invasion of Ukraine was based on flawed logic (Jun 2022). And a group of scholars posted a statement on social media blasting Moscow's "aggression" and urging Putin to stop the invasion (Buckley 2022). Tellingly, however, these instances of dissent have been deleted by or at the request of the Chinese authorities. This indicates that Beijing has decided not to allow statements from prominent figures chastising Russia to influence public debate.

So, China's stance toward Russia's invasion of Ukraine seems to more explicitly lean toward the Russian side, compared to its more tepid support of Moscow's annexation of Crimea in 2014. Three key factors have motivated China's pro-Russia stance from the beginning of the Russia-Ukraine war.

Most notably, key strategic interests of China and Russia are aligned. The two countries share an antagonism toward the US-led liberal international order that, they believe, continues to dominate international relations. In other words, they have some common geopolitical interests. Russia wants to

rebuild its sphere of influence in Eastern Europe and Eurasia (Oskanian 2021), as the war in Ukraine illustrates. China, meanwhile, is concerned that the US and its allies may be the main obstacles to its “reunification” with Taiwan and control over the South China Sea. In this context, China regards the US and NATO as the main threat not only to Russia’s security but also to China’s. From a Chinese perspective, the US and NATO “started the fire, fanned the flames and added fuel to it,” leading to the Russia–Ukraine war (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, PRC, 2022a). Moreover, China and Russia recognize each other as great powers. This helps explain China’s support for Russia’s position.

The impact of the Ukraine war on the Taiwan issue has been widely debated in Chinese expert circles. A common stance is to deem the war a threat to cross-Strait relations. Some Chinese experts draw a parallel between NATO’s eastward expansion and the US’s “containment” policy toward China (Wu Wei 2022). Other experts assert that the war made it harder for the US to relinquish the “Taiwan card,” as it can put China in a bind (Zhu 2022a). Thus, some experts argue that the US is trying to “Ukrainize” the Taiwan issue (Zhu 2022b), and also to develop strong bonds with European allies to cope with Russia and China (Cao 2022), for example by promoting their common norms as universal values (Zhou 2022).

Other Chinese experts link the Ukraine war to cross-Strait relations from the perspective of Taiwanese domestic debates. According to some, the war has strengthened anti-China sentiment, based on the logic of “today’s Ukraine is tomorrow’s Taiwan” (Wu Xinbo 2022). Others argue that the Taiwanese ruling party and government are using this war to legitimate their “hawkish” China policy (Zi 2022). But some contend that Taiwan’s posture will not affect the status quo of cross-Strait relations because China will never seek to reunify by military means and the US will never support Taiwan’s attempt to change the status quo in the region (Yan 2022).

Moving to material benefits, China stands to gain more from Russia’s invasion of Ukraine—certainly compared to Western countries. The benefits are mainly economic. The US-led economic sanctions imposed on Russia have encouraged many of Russia’s export partners to reduce their trade and investment links. This has lowered the prices of Russian natural resources, and China is taking advantage by importing vast amounts of Russian natural gas and oil at a discount (Yin 2022). This further reinforces China’s support for Russia.

Domestic politics could also be behind China's support of Russian in this situation. Russia is the only other major power with a similar political system and strategic goals. Both Russia and China have an authoritarian political system and the goal, at least on paper, to revive their imperial past by expanding their territory (Callahan 2008; Oskanian 2021). Paradoxically, Russia supports the so-called separatist movement in eastern Ukraine by providing military equipment and training, while China opposes the pro-independence forces in Hong Kong, Tibet, and Xinjiang. But China also claims Taiwan, in the same way that Russia claims Ukraine and other post-Soviet territories. This also underpins China's support for Russia.

5. NORTH KOREA'S RESPONSE TO RUSSIA'S INVASION OF UKRAINE

North Korea has been one of the countries that has most conspicuously sided with Russia in its response to the invasion of Ukraine. This is proved by multiple North Korean statements, UN General Assembly votes, and meetings between North Korean and Russian officials. In this regard, North Korea has been more open and less ambivalent in its support for Russia than China. Arguably, this is necessary for a weak power, which compared to a great power has to more clearly demonstrate its position—in this case, alignment with a great power's aggression toward a middle power—to reap the benefits. Indeed, Pyongyang has benefited in turn from Moscow's support in the UN Security Council.

To begin with, North Korea has been very clear that the US is to blame for Russia's actions. Even in the months prior to Moscow's attack on Ukraine, North Korea's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2021a, 2022f) was arguing that Washington was unnecessarily provoking Moscow with its actions in Europe and globally. On this view, it is the "hegemonic" policy of the US—and the broader West—that explains Russia's need to protect itself. In fact, before the invasion the Ministry of Foreign Affairs also blamed NATO and the EU, and expressed support for any action that Russia might take to "protect" itself from the aggressive US and broader West (2021b, 2022b, 2022 h).

After the invasion, this support via official statements continued. Above all, Kim Jong-un himself used the occasion of the Russia Day celebration to express his support for Moscow's "just cause" of protecting itself (Yonhap News Agency 2022b). Coming three and a half months into the conflict, this

explicit support proved that North Korea staunchly supported Russia. Indeed, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2022c, 2022 g) continued to blame the US and the broader West for the invasion, and to side with Moscow. In particular, the ministry explicitly repeated North Korea's assertion that NATO's expansion was a security threat to which Russia had to respond (2022a). It also denounced sanctions on Russia as counterproductive (2022 g).

China provided political support to Russia after the invasion, but North Korea went a step further. And in a sign of willingness to align with Beijing, its Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2022d) issued statements siding with China in its position on Russia's invasion of Ukraine. North Korea added to this support following the June 2022 NATO Summit. NATO's new ten-year Strategic Concept, issued during the summit, explicitly placed China, North Korea, and Russia among the challenges for NATO to address (NATO 2022). Pyongyang reacted by denouncing the US as seeking to "simultaneously suppress and encircle Russia and China," in the context of denunciations of the US's support for Ukraine and Washington's Indo-Pacific strategy, targeting Beijing, Moscow, and Pyongyang itself (Ji 2022).

North Korea's support for Russia was also demonstrated at high-level meetings. Only a few weeks after the invasion, a North Korean director-general met with Russia's ambassador to North Korea (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, DPRK, 2022e). This was especially significant because most countries had temporarily closed their embassies in Pyongyang following North Korea's decision to close its borders in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. But Russia had kept its embassy open, and North Korea took advantage of this decision to show its support for the invasion of Ukraine. Shortly after, Russia's deputy foreign minister Igor Morgulov met with the North Korean ambassador to Russia (Reuters 2022a). Again, this was a very significant gesture because at the time many foreign countries were either reducing their diplomatic footprint in Russia or making sure their diplomats were not seen in public with their Russian counterparts.

A measure of how far North Korea's support for Russia went beyond China's came in three UN General Assembly votes following the invasion. On March 2, 2022, North Korea was one of only five countries voting against a resolution to condemn the "aggression against Ukraine" (UN Digital Library 2022a). China only abstained. On March 22, North Korea was again one of only five countries voting against a new resolution on the Russia-Ukraine conflict. This resolution condemned Russia for the "humanitarian

consequences of the aggression against Ukraine” (UN Digital Library 2022c; UN General Assembly 2022a). China once more abstained. And on April 7, North Korea was one of 24 countries voting against a resolution to suspend Russia from the UN Human Rights Council for its invasion of Ukraine (UN Digital Library 2022d; UN General Assembly 2022b). This time, China also voted against.

After these votes, Russia and China blocked a US-drafted Security Council resolution to strengthen sanctions against North Korea (UN Digital Library 2022b). This was the first time both of them had voted against a North Korea resolution since 2006, after nine previous sanction votes (Beech 2022). The veto might have happened anyway, considering the state of Sino–American and especially Russo–American relations at the time. But from Pyongyang’s perspective, the timing of the veto could be interpreted as an instance of Pyongyang obtaining tangible benefits in exchange for its unequivocal support for Moscow. Furthermore, North Korea–Russia trade had collapsed in 2021 after the former had sealed its borders. However, the expectation was that North Korea would benefit from its support for Russia following the invasion of Ukraine in the form of greater trade, oil transfers from Russia, more North Korean workers being allowed into Russia, and Moscow refusing to apply existing sanctions on the North Korean regime and economy (Jang 2022). In short, North Korea would benefit from the growing divide between itself, China, and Russia on the one hand and a US-led coalition on the other.

6. CHINA–NORTH KOREA RELATIONS: STRONGER WEAK–GREAT POWER ALIGNMENT

Weak powers seek alignment with great powers as a means to ensure survival. In the case of North Korea, its decades-long choice has been balancing with China—and the Soviet Union or Russia—the threat that it perceives from the US. Therefore, it is logical that Russia’s actions in Ukraine have brought China and North Korea closer to each other. After all, they have the same view of why Russia invaded Ukraine. And they also have a strong relationship with Moscow, with the three of them often lumped together as a “threat” to the US-led liberal international order.

As mentioned, China and North Korea have explicitly and repeatedly stated that they see Russia’s invasion of Ukraine as a legitimate response to actions by the US. In particular, they see NATO’s expansion into Central

and Eastern Europe as the main driver behind the invasion. Already back in 2014, when Moscow took over Crimea, both Beijing and Pyongyang sided with Russia. Following this new invasion of Ukraine, they have doubled down on this approach and explicitly and repeatedly indicated that it is the US, NATO, or “the West” in general that has “forced” Russia to exercise its “right” to protect itself. This is consistent with their perception that they, too, are threatened by the US.

Furthermore, Beijing and Pyongyang have both provided diplomatic support to Moscow. Most notably, North Korea has voted against three UN resolutions related to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, while China abstained from two of the votes and voted against in the third. Even though this constitutes only partial alignment, it sets them apart from the large majority of UN members who have condemned Russia via their UN votes.⁴ Neither China nor North Korea has done so, and this can be seen as implicit diplomatic support for Russia. This has been the long-standing policy of both countries, dating back to Moscow’s annexation of Crimea.

There are good reasons for Beijing and Pyongyang to show solidarity with Moscow. Their respective links with Russia are strong, and in the case of China they were reinforced right before the invasion of Ukraine through a “no limits” partnership. And the reaction of the US and NATO, as well as Washington allies such as Japan and South Korea, to the invasion shows China and North Korea the opposition that they would face were they to have a conflict with Taiwan and South Korea, respectively. The willingness of the US and its allies to sanction Russia even at some economic cost to themselves might be replicated if China goes to war with Taiwan. Something like the provision of military aid to Ukraine by the US and its allies for the fight against Russia could also happen in the case of a China–Taiwan or inter-Korean conflict. More broadly, Washington’s ability to put together an alliance of European and Indo-Pacific states could be replicated if China or North Korea went to war over Taiwan or South Korea, respectively. In short, the reaction of the US to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine gives China and Russia solid proof of how the US can work to oppose a country it sees as an enemy.

4. In total, 73% and 72.5% of General Assembly members, respectively, have voted in favor of resolutions condemning Russia for the invasion: the first condemning the “aggression against Ukraine” and the second decriing the “humanitarian consequences of the aggression against Ukraine.” This puts China and North Korea in a small minority.

The long-term effects on Sino–North Korean relations of Russia's invasion of Ukraine have yet to be seen, but there are already indicators of a positive effect in the short term. These indicators support our argument that weak powers seek alignment with great powers, and in the case in hand here, that North Korea has a strategy to pursue balancing of the US with China. The indicators of greater Sino–North Korean alignment span politics and economics. It should be noted that given the opacity of North Korea, as well as of China and Russia when it comes to their relations with Pyongyang, other indicators may only be uncovered in the future when new sources become available.

Starting with politics, in May 2022 China and Russia vetoed a UN Security Council resolution on North Korea's missile tests for the first time since 2006, when votes on Pyongyang's missile and nuclear tests restarted. What is more, Beijing and Moscow both denounced the sanctions on North Korea as “inhumane” and called for a negotiated resolution to tensions in the Korean Peninsula (UN Security Council 2022). Certainly, China and North Korea have a long-standing policy of calling for negotiations on this matter. But this veto of a new Security Council resolution after having allowed several others to pass over the years indicates a warming of relations between North Korea and the two of them. Implicitly, China's and Russia's actions in the Security Council also indicate that they see joining the US in imposing sanctions on North Korea as a worse geopolitical move than allowing further North Korean missile tests. At the very least, Pyongyang is aware that its tests will not lead to new UN sanctions in the short run.

Interestingly, China and Russia's focus on sanctions can also be linked to the sanctions that the US and its allies, including Japan and South Korea, have imposed on Moscow. These sanctions do not directly target Chinese firms. But they have had a knock-on effect on Sino–Russian economic relations, since Chinese firms are wary of being hit by sanctions if they engage in trade and investment with Russia (Politi 2022). Thus Beijing's opposition to new UN sanctions on North Korea is now informed by the effects that sanctions on Russia are having on Chinese firms as well. Certainly, China–Russia economic relations are much larger and comprehensive than China–North Korea relations, but from a political standpoint China–North Korea relations have benefitted from the US's actions in response to Moscow's invasion of Ukraine.

Looking at economic indicators, data from China's General Administration of Customs are inconclusive because Russia's invasion of Ukraine coincided with the start of the third year of the COVID-19 pandemic. North Korea reacted to the pandemic by closing its borders to trade. The Kim regime tentatively reopened the borders in early 2022, only to shut them again when a new, more transmissible COVID-19 variant appeared (Stangorone 2022). Still, the Chinese customs data indicate that trade with North Korea surged in the weeks and months after Russia invaded Ukraine, as North Korea imported vaccines, medical equipment, and infection-prevention materials to deal with the new COVID-19 variant (Mao 2022). Although it is unlikely that this surge in Sino–North Korea trade was related to Russia's actions, Beijing would have been reluctant to export these materials to its neighbor had they clashed over their response to the invasion of Ukraine. Thus the growing trade between China and North Korea does suggest that alignment between them has been reinforced by Russia's actions. It could be that the growing trade between them has helped improve relations. But this does not preclude their shared reactions to Russia's invasion of Ukraine also having pushed things in that direction.

Similarly, in Dandong in April 2022 China and North Korea held a bilateral trade fair, their first in seven years. The fair had been canceled in 2016, after China had agreed to a new round of UN Security Council sanctions on Pyongyang in relation to its missile and nuclear program (Yonhap News Agency 2022a). As with bilateral trade, the reopening of the trade fair cannot be directly linked to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. But China or North Korea could have decided to cancel the fair, had there been a disagreement over the proper response to Moscow's actions. And the fair had originally been suspended precisely because of a political disagreement between China and North Korea. So the fact that the fair was resumed so soon after Russia's invasion of Ukraine shows that the shared position of China and North Korea on this conflict allowed economic relations to continue. From the North Korean perspective, its economic dependence on China reinforced the need for alignment.

Overall, it can be argued that the stronger cooperation between China and North Korea following Russia's invasion of Ukraine has benefited Pyongyang more than it has Beijing. As we have seen, both of them have sided with Moscow—even if Pyongyang has been more open about it. But given the lopsided relationship between China and North Korea, the benefits that

Pyongyang has accrued are certainly more important. This includes a veto by China and Russia of new UN sanctions on North Korea, and growth in trade with China. Perhaps both would have happened even if there was no war in Ukraine. But the timing, with the benefits coming soon after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, suggest that at the very least the war has opened the door to China's offering some concessions to North Korea.

7. CONCLUSION

Relations between China and North Korea can be analyzed from many perspectives. In this article, we have used the perspective of weak power–great power relations, with specific reference to alignment. Our case study is the impact on Sino–North Korean relations of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, per the theme of this special issue. Our expectation was that China and North Korea would react similarly to the invasion, which would thus reinforce alignment between the two of them, at least in the short term. And this does appear to be the case, looking at the available data on the politics and economics of this relationship.

China and North Korea agree on who is to blame for Russia's invasion of Ukraine: the US, NATO, and “the West” more broadly—in other words, the key proponents and representatives of the liberal international order. In this sense, North Korea is balancing the US and its allies with the support of China, because the Kim regime feels threatened. Alignment with China strengthens its chances of survival, and in this sense sharing Beijing's position on the invasion of Ukraine is beneficial for Pyongyang.

Beijing and Pyongyang also agree on the proper response to Russia's actions in Ukraine. They have provided political and diplomatic support to Moscow by voting against (or at least abstaining from) UN resolutions to condemn the Putin government. This position can be traced back all the way to 2014, when China and North Korea first provided diplomatic cover for Russia in the UN after its annexation of Crimea. This support should not be underestimated—most UN members have voted in favor of the resolutions, condemning or even punishing Russia for its actions in Ukraine. Again, from the North Korean perspective, this approach makes sense when considering that China—and also Russia itself—might help shield Pyongyang from its own strictures and punishments, imposed in response to its missile and nuclear tests.

That there is now stronger alignment between China and North Korea following Russia's invasion of Ukraine is shown by both political and economic indicators. China (together with Russia) has vetoed a UN Security Council resolution on North Korea's missile tests for the first time since 2006. Beijing has also condemned the sanctions on Pyongyang, as it has opposed sanctions on Moscow for its actions in Ukraine. Trade has continued to flow between China and North Korea, and even increased in the weeks after the invasion. And China and North Korea have held a bilateral trade fair for the first time since 2016, when it was suspended after China voted for UN Security Council sanctions on North Korea. Put together, all these indicators make us believe that Russia's invasion of Ukraine has had a positive effect on Sino–North Korean relations.

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