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South Korea: Siding with the West and distancing from Russia

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Abstract

South Korea's response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine has been marked by Seoul siding with NATO, the US, Europe, and, thus, Ukraine, and distancing itself from Russia. At the time of writing, South Korea is the only country in Asia to condemn Russia including in UN votes, impose sanctions on Moscow, provide aid and non-lethal military equipment to Ukraine directly, and, via third parties, transfer arms to Kyiv to fend off the Russian invasion. In other words, no other country in Asia has provided Ukraine with such a wide-ranging level of support. In this article, we answer the four questions set out by the editors of this special issue to understand how and why South Korea has reacted to Russia's invasion of Ukraine in the way just described and regardless of the type of government in office.

Introduction

South Korea's response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine has been marked by Seoul siding with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the US, Europe, and, thus, Ukraine, and distancing itself from Russia. South Korea has condemned Russia including in UN votes (Kang 2022a; Kim 2022c), imposed sanctions on Moscow, provided aid and non-lethal military equipment to Ukraine directly (Yonhap News 2022d), and, via third parties, transferred arms to Kyiv to fend off the Russian invasion (Liebermann 2022). Indeed, South Korea is among the few Asian countries to have provided Ukraine with such a wide-ranging level of support.

South Korea's decision to provide comprehensive support to Ukraine, and the coalition backing Kyiv more broadly, may come as a surprise when considering the links between Seoul and Moscow. Prior to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, South Korea was Russia's second largest trading partner in Asia—only surpassed by China—and eighth largest overall (World Integrated Trade Solution 2020). Above all, Russia was key to Seoul's efforts to diversify its energy supply away from the Middle East, an increasingly important market for South Korean firms, and the location of a small but economically significant cluster of South Korean factories. As a result of Seoul's position, South Korea has already taken an economic hit, although official data on the economic impact of the war is not available at time of writing.

Furthermore, South Korean policy-makers saw Russia as a potential partner in dealing with North Korea, Seoul believed that stronger relations with Moscow could help diversify its foreign policy links, and the ROK Army had benefitted from arms and technology transfers from Russia for decades. South Korea's positioning in the Russia-Ukraine war has affected Seoul's bilateral political and military links with Moscow. In fact, Russia designated South Korea an “unfriendly” state after the latter went ahead with the imposition of sanctions (Yonhap News 2022a).

Two consecutive South Korean presidents have positioned their country in the conflict in a relatively similar way: the liberal Moon Jae-in in office until 9 May 2022 and the conservative Yoon Suk-yeol who took power from 10 May. This suggests that there is an agreement at the policy elite level that South Korea should support Ukraine and its allies and distance itself from Russia. In this article, we answer the four questions set out by the editors of this special issue

to understand how and why South Korea has reacted to Russia's invasion of Ukraine in the way just described and regardless of the type of government in office.

We have organized the article as follows. Over the next four sections, we answer the four questions posed by the editors of this special issue one by one, mainly building on primary data in consideration of the recency of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. These questions are as follows: how much importance does South Korea attach to Russia's invasion of Ukraine and what are the costs and benefits of the invasion for South Korea? What has been the impact of the war on the Indo-Pacific from a South Korean perspective? To what extent has the war intensified competition in the region? And what has been its impact on regional alliances from a South Korean perspective? We then conclude the article summarizing the key points.

Costs and benefits of South Korea's response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine

Prior to Russia's invasion of Ukraine and before the scope of Russian actions would become clear, South Korea set up a task force mainly focused on the economic impact of growing tensions between Moscow and Kyiv. Most notably, the Moon government set up a task force on 28 January to assess the economic impact of the crisis in Ukraine (Park 2022a), based on which the government convened an Economic and Security Strategic meeting on 14 February, presided by Moon himself (Park 2022b). The key message of Moon's speech (2022) following the meeting was the need to address the crisis in global supply chains, with consideration to the challenges brought on by the Ukraine crisis. On 22 February, Moon presided over a National Security Council (NSC) meeting discuss measures including the protection of South Korean nationals and South Korean businesses in Ukraine (Lee 2022c).

These initial responses took place in the context of a series of North Korean provocations. The month of January 2022 alone saw seven missile tests by North Korea, including short-range ballistic missiles (SRBM), cruise missiles, hypersonic missiles, and intermediate range ballistic missiles (IRBM) (Lendon *et al.*, 2022). This would have been frustrating for Moon, who had spent much of his five-year term trying to resolve the issue of North Korea's nuclear weapons, particularly given concerns that the United States would distance itself from the North Korea problem to focus on Russia's potential actions against Ukraine (Lendon and Seo 2022).

On 25 February, the day after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, South Korea's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) issued a three-part statement, stating that the South Korean government "strongly condemns Russia's armed invasion against Ukraine," "Ukraine's sovereignty, territorial integrity and independence should be respected," and that "the Korean government will support and join the international community's efforts, including economic sanctions, to curb armed invasion and resolve the situation peacefully" (MOFA Spokesperson 2022). A few days prior to this announcement, numerous countries, such as the US, UK, Germany, France, Australia, and Japan had already denounced Russia's actions in Eastern Ukraine and issued or warned of issuing immediate sanctions (Aljazeera 2022). Thus, South Korea had already taken the decision to join international sanctions by the time that Russia invaded Ukraine.¹ Its partners were aware of this decision.² Seoul then publicly announced a first sanctions package on 1 March (Ministry of Economy and Finance 2022b), followed by a second package on 7 March (Ministry of Economy and Finance 2022a). Subsequently, Seoul would continue to announce new sanction packages in line with those led by the US and the EU.

¹ Interview with South Korean government official, 25 February 2022; interview with South Korean government official, 26 April 2022.

² Interview with EU official, 26 February 2022.

South Korea had already joined this condemnation prior to Russia's actual invasion. To begin with, Seoul issued a Minister of Foreign Affairs-level joint statement together with the US and Japan on 12 February sharing "unwavering support for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity" and committing "to work closely together to deter further Russian escalation" (U.S. Department of State 2022). Furthermore, following the NSC meeting of 22 February, Moon stated that the "sovereignty and territorial integrity" of Ukraine "must be respected" and also indicated that South Korea would participate in the efforts to deal with tensions around Ukraine (Lee 2022c).

South Korea followed up with its position already laid out prior to Russia's invasion of Ukraine by stepping up once Moscow attacked its neighbour. At the international level, South Korea took a series of actions to demonstrate its position. These include voting in favour of United Nations resolutions condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine and suspending Russia from the Human Rights Council, respectively. In the 20th MIKTA Foreign Ministers Meeting, an informal grouping of middle powers comprised of Australia, Indonesia, Mexico, South Korea, and Turkey, the Joint Communique stated in no vague terms that the members "deplore in the strongest terms Russia's aggression against Ukraine" and support Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity. South Korea also issued a Joint Statement with the World Trade Organization (WTO) condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine (Ministry of Trade, Industry and Energy 2022). Indeed, these steps as well as South Korea's participation in international sanctions led Russia to include South Korea among its list of "unfriendly states," which included the US, members of the European Union, and Japan, among others (Yonhap News 2022a).

Another indication of South Korea's commitment to join international efforts against Russia was the strengthened relations between South Korea and NATO. South Korean and NATO officials held several meetings throughout the months of April and May, both in the NATO Headquarters in Belgium as well as in Seoul. These included the NATO Ministers of Foreign Affairs meeting, the first time for a South Korean foreign minister to attend a high-profile NATO meeting, a meeting with the NATO Secretary General, and a meeting of NATO's four Asia-Pacific partners (South Korea, Japan, Australia, and New Zealand). It was during the Minister of Foreign Affairs meeting that South Korea announced its plans to provide humanitarian aid to Ukraine worth \$40 million (MOFA 2022a).

Also demonstrative of closer relations with NATO was the visit by the Chair of the NATO Military Committee, Admiral Rob Bauer to South Korea from 9 to 12 April. The two sides discussed ways to expand bilateral cooperation, increasing interoperability between the two forces, geopolitical challenges surrounding the Korean Peninsula, and measures to address the Ukraine crisis (Chung 2022). The timing of the visit, specifically in the midst of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, indicated the importance NATO placed on its relations with South Korea.

Indeed, closer relations with NATO had been a priority for the Moon administration, which sought to diversify diplomatic relations. A notable output of such efforts was South Korea's entry to the NATO Cooperative Cyber Defense Center of Excellence (CCDCOE), in May, as the first Asian member (Yonhap News 2022c). Although South Korea's presidential elections held in March and the inauguration of the incoming president in May meant many of the fruits of this labour would be passed on to the following Yoon Seok-yeol administration, including the invitation to the South Korean leader to the NATO summit scheduled for June 2022, it is worth noting that the groundwork made possible a smooth transition insofar as South Korea's

relations with NATO were concerned. Yoon continued this work during the Madrid NATO summit of 28-30 June, when he became the first South Korean president ever to be present at the organization's main event (NATO 2022b).

While the above demonstrates reputational benefits or benefits in terms of closer relations with NATO, these measures also came with economic costs as well as political and security risks. Russia is South Korea's 10th largest trading partner, with total trade worth \$27.3 billion, amounting to 2.2% of Korea's total trade (KOTRA 2022). While the figure is not significant in absolute terms, international sanctions cast a blow to the 13 Korean companies in Ukraine and the 40-plus South Korean companies that operate in Russia (Baek and Park 2022). For example, Hyundai Motor Co., the second largest car manufacturer in Russia, closed its manufacturing factory in St. Petersburg due to component shortages such as automotive semiconductors (The Korea Herald 2022). Samsung, the largest smartphone and television seller in Russia stopped all exports to Russia, including chips for consumer electronics due to disruptions in global logistics and unstable exchange rates (Woo 2022). LG has also suspended shipments of all its products to Russia. Russia's invasion and subsequent international sanctions also damaged the prospects for South Korea's New Northern Policy, of which Russia was a key partner. The New Northern Policy was introduced by the Moon government to link South Korea to Russia and the rest of Eurasia via North Korea, including by building railroads and roads (The Presidential Committee on Northern Economic Cooperation 2022). The objective was to link North Korea to the economy of the region, as a means to reduce military tensions and change Pyongyang's foreign and security policy calculus.

In addition, the decision to provide only non-lethal weapons to Ukraine reflected the political and security risks South Korea faced surrounding Russia's leverage over North Korea.

Addressing South Korean parliament via a video link, Ukrainian president Volodimir Zelenskyy asked South Korea to provide military aid, specifically noting that South Korea can provide indispensable aid such as armoured vehicles, anti-aircraft, anti-tank and anti-ship weapons (Smith and Choi 2022). However, even after this request, South Korea decided to send a second round of non-lethal aid worth \$1.6 million, including bulletproof vests, helmets, medical supplies, and meals (Yonhap News 2022d). During a telephone call between South Korean Minister of Defense Suh Wook and his Ukrainian counterpart, it was explained that there were “limits in providing lethal weapon systems to Ukraine” given South Korea’s security situation and potential impact on South Korea’s military readiness posture (Kang and Song 2022).

Specifically, military experts noted the challenges of supplying the specific weapon Ukraine was interested in purchasing, the Cheongung surface-to-air missiles, which can engage incoming aircraft and ballistic missile targets. Because of a lack of stockpile, they would have to be sent from the South Korean military, which could cause a gap in military readiness. In addition, much of the early weapons technology was transferred from Russia, creating further complications. In other words, South Korea’s provision of lethal weapons could incentivise Russia to transfer its advanced weaponry or technology to North Korea (Kuhn 2022).

Despite these concerns, the change in government to the Yoon Seok-yeol administration saw further boosts in South Korea’s response. Less than two weeks after Yoon’s inauguration, he welcomed US president Joe Biden to South Korea where the two sides held a summit. The Joint Statement reflected the broadened scope of the alliance, noting that the alliance has “matured into a deep and comprehensive strategic relationship” (Joint Statement 2022). On Ukraine, the two sides noted that Russia’s aggression against Ukraine posed a threat to the

rules-based international order and that both sides responded by imposing sanctions and export controls, along with providing humanitarian aid (Joint Statement 2022).

In the same week, South Korean Vice Defense Minister Shin Beom-chul took part in the second virtual Ukraine Defense Contact Group, hosted by the US Defense Secretary. The Contact Group was formed in April with monthly meetings being held by some 40 countries including members of NATO and Japan, among others (KBS 2022). During the meeting, Shin shared South Korea's efforts in providing humanitarian and non-lethal aid to Ukraine (Ministry of National Defense 2022).

While the provision of non-lethal aid was still South Korea's official position, there were some indications that South Korea was reviewing the possibility of providing lethal weapons through third parties. Specifically, Canada had inquired regarding South Korea's export of 155-milimeter artillery shells due to a shortage of ammunition (Kang 2022b). The exported shells would then be provided to Ukraine. Although there has been no official decision as of August, the rationale for the Yoon government to decline such a request appears weak, particularly given that in the same week, South Korea approved negotiations on the export of K4 machine guns to Poland, which had been sending weapons to Ukraine (Ji 2022).

In the end, indeed, South Korea agreed for Poland to supply South Korean-made weapons to Ukraine at some point in June-July, even though no exact date can be pinpointed at the time of writing. In other words, Seoul agreed to provide weapons to Kyiv via third parties, since the arms transfers from Poland to Ukraine could have only happened if approved by the Yoon government (Davies and Song 2022). Furthermore, South Korea signed an agreement with Poland on 27 July to provide the NATO member with up to 1,000 tanks, 600 howitzers, and

50 fighter jets, starting before the end of 2022 (Smith 2022). Potentially, some of these weapons could then be transferred to Ukraine.

From a South Korean perspective, the provision of military support to Ukraine via NATO members built on its arms sales to NATO countries including Norway, Poland, or the UK following Russia's invasion of Crimea in 2014 (SIPRI 2022). In other words, South Korea had already been helping NATO members deter a possible aggression from Russia dating back to the Park Geun-hye administration. Yet, the provision of lethal weapons to Ukraine via third parties would serve Seoul to boost its politico-diplomatic and military links with NATO, as well as to boost its arms sales which South Korean policy-makers see as an economic growth engine.

Also during the Yoon administration, a delegation led by Special Envoy Kim Gi-hyun paid a five-day visit to Europe, meeting with members of the European Commission, NATO, and state leaders in France. The visit was significant in that not only was it the first delegation dispatched overseas under Yoon's presidency, but it was also the first time for South Korea to send such a large delegation to Europe so early on in a president's term. The meetings affirmed the strategic partnership between South Korea and the EU and committed to seek measures to develop value-based relations (MOFA 2022b). In meetings with NATO and France, the two sides respectively discussed the situation in Ukraine and ways to enhance cooperation on the matter (MOFA 2022c).

Even though there was consensus between liberal and conservative policy-makers about the policy to pursue following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, as evidenced by their similar response, there was a public debate about the benefits and risks associated with it. Writing in *Korea*

JoongAng Daily, former South Korean Ambassador to Russia Wie Sung-rak emphasized that South Korea was in a difficult position as it sought to support the US-led coalition supporting Ukraine while trying not to break all ties with Russia—or China (Wie 2022). Columnist Nam Jeong-ho, meanwhile, emphasized that South Korea’s support for Ukraine could prove costly due to the impact on South Korean firms (previously) investing in Russia and rising inflation (Nam 2022a). Science professor Hasok Chang, for his part, argued that South Korean chipmakers could suffer due to possible disruptions to supply chains as a result of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine (Change 2022). Traditionally considered a right-leaning newspaper, *Korea JoongAng Daily* giving voice to experts cautioning about the possible negative economic impact of the war in Ukraine signalled that this was a consideration among South Korean elites and opinion-makers.

Likewise, *The Hankyoreh* also gave voice to those raising concerns about the impact for Korea of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. But the concerns highlighted by this left-leaning newspaper were different. International Relations professor and advisor to previous (liberal) administrations Moon Chung-in argued that Russia’s invasion of Ukraine posed a dilemma for South Korea, in that it could choose to go nuclear itself to prevent a foreign invasion, but potentially face sanctions as a result, or could maintain a strong ROK-US alliance along with a strong economy (Moon 2022). Washington, DC, correspondent Lee Bon-young, meanwhile, cautioned that South Korea could become a “new Ukraine” in that it could see itself as a new pawn in the great power game in the future (Lee 2022a). For her part, editorial writer Park Min-hee suggested that Seoul should escape black-and-white ways of thinking and simply follow US policy when it came to the invasion of Ukraine (Park 2022c). In a sense, *The Hankyoreh* saw the invasion of Ukraine as an example of what could befall weaker powers who could not avoid entrapment in great power conflicts.

Differently, civil society had a clear view about the need to support Ukraine. A survey of adults in 27 countries conducted in April 2022 showed that a large majority of South Korea's respondents thought that the war in Ukraine affected their country and therefore it should interfere in the war, economic sanctions on Russia were an effective way to stop the war, and it was worth paying more for oil and gas to defend Ukraine against Russia. Interestingly, 78 percent and 75 percent of South Korean respondents agreed with the last two statements, respectively—the largest share among the 27 countries surveyed (Ipsos 2022). On a separate poll conducted in June, 72 percent of South Korean respondents agreed that their country should provide non-lethal support to Ukraine, with a further 15 percent indicating that it should also provide weapons. Meanwhile, 84 percent of South Koreans expressed that they had an interest in the war in Ukraine (Nam 2022b). Another international poll conducted in June as well showed that 84 percent of South Koreans had a negative view of Russia, a 26 percent increase from the previous year—the biggest increase in negative perceptions of Russia in the Asian countries polled (Wike et al. 2022).

To conclude, South Korea's response to the crisis in Ukraine unfolded in the context of a hectic domestic environment due to the presidential elections and North Korea's missile launches. While there were debates in the media about the potential consequences of supporting Ukraine for South Korea, the country's public opinion overwhelmingly favoured supporting Kiev and sanctioning Moscow. In this context, the Moon administration initially responded by focusing on the safety of South Korean nationals and businesses in the affected regions, followed almost immediately by more comprehensive responses in line with Western and other democratic states.

Although measures such as taking part in international sanctions bore economic costs for South Korea and risked geopolitical tensions surrounding Russia's leverage over North Korea, greater support for Ukraine provided reputational benefits and allowed closer relations with other parties. In the process, South Korea was able to acquire the image of a responsible democratic country and recognition as a like-minded partner. Particularly for the Yoon administration, South Korea's response to the events in Ukraine was framed as an opportunity for closer cooperation with the US, NATO, and European partners. Indeed, the first month of Yoon's presidency underscored his administration's commitment to value-oriented diplomacy and the ambition to become a "global pivotal state" (Yoon 2022).

South Korea's view of the impact of the invasion on the Indo-Pacific region

The Moon government in office from May 2017 to May 2022 did not unveil an Indo-Pacific strategy by that name. However, Moon's New Southern Policy (NSP)—rebranded NSP Plus in November 2020—was widely considered to be the equivalent to Seoul's Indo-Pacific strategy (Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism 2021). Most notably, South Korea and the US issued a joint statement in January 2021 laying out in detail the many ways in which they were working together to promote cooperation between NSP and Washington's own Indo-Pacific strategy (U.S. Department of State 2021). Upon his inauguration, Yoon pledged that his government would issue a new Indo-Pacific strategy. The expectation was that the strategy will be published before the end of 2022, and would be similar to Moon's NSP, including in its alignment with Washington.³

³ Interview with South Korean government official, 10 August 2022.

Moon's NSP effectively became his government's Indo-Pacific strategy, and was understood as such by other countries as well. It had three pillars: people, peace, and prosperity. Peace is the label used for the security pillar. Arguably, this pillar was initially ill-defined compared to prosperity (i.e., economics) and people (i.e., people-to-people links). However, it was better defined in the joint document issued with the US in 2021. The focus was on transnational crimes, counter-narcotics, maritime security, cyber-security, marine environmental protection, water security, and disaster response and preparedness (U.S. Department of State 2021). Maritime security and cyber-security were particularly relevant, since they targeted China primarily but also North Korea and Russia. In fact, the joint statement issued by Moon and Biden in May 2021 was telling in this respect. The statement specifically linked the South Korea-US cooperative approach to the Indo-Pacific region to 'freedom of navigation and overflight' in the South China Sea and 'peace and stability' in the Taiwan Strait (The White House 2021). These were clear references to China's behaviour. The joint statement issued by Yoon and Biden in May 2022 was equally clear in drawing a link between their cooperation in the Indo-Pacific to Beijing's actions in the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait (The White House 2022b).

In this respect, South Korea explicitly connected its Indo-Pacific strategy to the US's. Seoul's behaviour, therefore, suggests that its approach towards the Indo-Pacific is a means to reinforce relations with its key ally, among other goals including strengthening security relations with Southeast Asia or boosting exports and investment. The Indo-Pacific strategy also serves Seoul to strengthen links with other partners, such as Australia, Japan, India, Indonesia, or the Philippines. This is done, most notably, through joint maritime exercises (Commander, U.S. Pacific Fleet 2022) and arms sales (Davies and Song 2022). Implicitly, therefore, South Korea is countering China with its Indo-Pacific strategy. In public, however, both the Moon and Yoon

governments have refrained from positing their respective Indo-Pacific strategies as anti-China vehicles. For example, the Yoon government explained that it did not see its joining of Biden's Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF) as an attempt to undermine China's role in trade and investment flows in the region (Lee 2022d). From South Korea's perspective, it does not make sense to be openly confrontational towards China given the geographical proximity between both countries and Beijing's potential role in diffusing inter-Korean tensions.

From South Korea's perspective, Russia's invasion of Ukraine has implications for the situation in East Asia and the broader Indo-Pacific region, specifically concerning Taiwan and North Korea as well as Japan's military modernization efforts and South Korea's own desire to enhance its nuclear deterrence. Needless to say, there are limits to the parallels that can be drawn to the cases of North Korea and Taiwan. However, shifts occurring at the systemic level, such as closer ties between Russia and China or intensifying tensions between the US and China against the backdrop of Russia's invasion of Ukraine will have second-order effects on how contentious issues in the Indo-Pacific develop in the future.

Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, relations between Russia and China have become visibly closer. Before the invasion, the two sides issued a Joint Statement on 4 February when Vladimir Putin visited Beijing to take part in the opening ceremony of the Olympic Winter Games. The Joint Statement states that the bilateral relations have "no limits" and expresses concern of "attempts by external forces to undermine security and stability in their common adjacent regions, intend to counter interference by outside forces in the internal affairs of sovereign countries under any pretext, oppose colour revolutions," (President of Russia 2022) a clear reference to the situation in Ukraine and Taiwan.

Following the invasion, China has declined to refer to the crisis as an “invasion.” It has abstained from a UN General Assembly vote to denounce Russia’s invasion, on the basis of non-interference in other states’ affairs. While China’s Five-Point Position on the Ukrainian issue underscores China’s belief that the “sovereignty and territorial integrity of all countries should be respected and protected,” (MOFA of China 2022a) China has also noted the “special historical context of the Ukrainian issue” (MOFA of China 2022b), and that “legitimate security concerns of any country must be respected” (MOFA of China 2022b). In this context, Chinese actions are far from neutral. For example, to fill the vacuum caused by Western sanctions, China has increased trade with Russia; resulting in a 28% increase compared to the previous year (Wang and Song 2022).

China’s position on this matter serves dual purposes. Not only can China expect to receive Russia’s support in the case of a contingency on the Taiwan Strait, it also sends a warning that in dire circumstances, China may be forced to take action on Taiwan. To be sure, both China and Taiwan are careful not to draw analogies between Ukraine and Taiwan. For China, Taiwan has “always been an inalienable part of China’s territory” and the US is the “culprit of current tensions surrounding Ukraine,” “sending weapons, heightening tensions, creating panic and even hyping up the possibility of warfare” (MOFA of China 2022c).

The language is similar to how China describes the US activities in the Indo-Pacific region. For example, Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Wang Wenbin commented that the US is the “biggest factor fuelling militarization in the Asia-Pacific,” (MOFA of China 2022d), regularly deploying military aircraft and warships in the South China Sea and US naval ships transiting the Taiwan Strait at least once a month. The message is that while Taiwan and Ukraine are

fundamentally different issues, the US is the cause of tensions in both cases. This is seen differently by Seoul. From a South Korean perspective, Ukraine's present could be Taiwan's future. In common with other Asian counterparts, South Korean policy-makers and analysts quickly drew a parallel between the situations of the two countries (The Economist 2022).

While Taiwan has also been reluctant to be compared to Ukraine (Blanchard 2022a), the Taiwanese foreign minister noted the lessons that could be drawn from Ukraine's defence techniques, such as asymmetric capability and mobilisation of the populace (Inskeep 2022). Furthermore, Taiwan has been vocal about its support for Ukraine, with Tsai Ing-wen stating that "determination [to defending our democratic way of life] will rally fellow democracies" and that "like Ukraine, Taiwan will not bend under pressure" (Blanchard 2022b).

For the US, there has been some confusion on whether it was reversing its policy of strategic ambiguity concerning Taiwan. On the one hand, Biden and high-level officials have iterated the US support of the One-China policy. On the other hand, Biden's comments on US intent to militarily defend Taiwan in the case of a Chinese invasion has led to tensions between the US and China. While such rhetoric is more likely mere clumsiness rather than a fundamental shift in the US position, the US does see China's activities in the region, such as incursions into Taiwan's air defence zones and the militarisation of artificial islands as the cause of heightened tensions. Furthermore, lessons have been drawn from Russia's invasion of Ukraine, requiring a reassessment of Taiwan's military capability of fighting off an invasion and the appropriate weapons system that would be required (Wong and Qin 2022).

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has also brought North Korea closer to the Russia-China bloc. North Korea sees the root cause of the conflict as the "hegemonic policy" and "high-

handedness of the US and the West” (Shin 2022). Such a position not only ensures Russia’s support for North Korea but is also a reflection of how North Korea views the world. Indeed, Russia and China have come to defend North Korea on numerous occasions. For example, after North Korea fired three missiles in May 2022, including an intercontinental missile (ICBM), Russia and China both vetoed a UN Security Council resolution that would ban oil and tobacco exports to North Korea (Jo 2022). This is in contrast to the two UNSC resolutions passed in 2017 which Russia and China voted in favour of, after North Korea tested two ICBMs (Resolution 2371) and conducted its sixth nuclear test (Resolution 2375).

Furthermore, North Korea’s observations of the events unfolding in Russia and Ukraine will reinforce its commitment to self-reliance. This is because it is seeing how, despite China and Russia’s “no-limit” relationship, China has not provided military aid to Russia, even after Russia’s request (Wong and Barnes 2022). Indeed, China’s evolving response to the Ukraine invasion indicates the limits to China’s support to Russia, particularly as the war drags on.

Not only does China’s quiet endorsement of Russian behaviour contradict its stance on respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, it also puts added strain on its own tensions with the US and as a consequence, exacerbates the already contentious issues surrounding Taiwan and the South China Sea. North Korea is aware of this and likely mindful of how it could end up as a bargaining chip between the US and China. In other words, while China may be sympathetic to North Korea’s grievances in the near term, it may decide to cooperate with the US on North Korea matters in order to protect its core interests surrounding Taiwan. Thus, from North Korea’s perspective, while demonstration of close ties with Russia and China are necessary in terms of optics, it cannot risk relying on either for its survival. In this light, the surest way for North Korea to ensure regime survival will be to develop and maintain nuclear

deterrence. The main takeaway for North Korea is that Ukraine is paying the price for having voluntarily given up its nuclear arsenal with the signing of the Budapest Memorandum in 1994.

The degree to which South Korea's position on North Korea was driven by the latter's reaction to the Russia-Ukraine war should not be exaggerated. Public debate about the South's policy towards the North, both under Moon and later under Yoon, has been shaped by Russia's actions in Ukraine. Arguably, a key reason is that there is an obvious difference in the (perceived) relative strength of Russia vis-à-vis Ukraine compared to the two Koreas. Also, Ukraine is not part of NATO but South Korea has a 69-year old alliance with the US. This is another important difference.

Having said that, Russia's invasion of Ukraine served to reignite the debate about whether South Korea should go nuclear. Even before Moscow's actions, a majority of South Koreans favoured their country developing its own nuclear weapons (Dalton, Friedhoff and Kim 2022). Partly, this is the result of North Korea's own nuclear weapons programme and partly it is the result of a belief that the US will not necessarily support South Korea with its nuclear weapons in case of conflict. Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, South Korea had an open debate about becoming nuclear (Choe 2022). This debate was driven by the just-stated reasons, plus the fact that Ukraine used to be a nuclear power and giving up its nuclear deterrent seems to have led Russia to conclude that it could launch an invasion.

Another impact of Russia's invasion of Ukraine has been shifts in Japan's position towards Russia. Specifically, Japan has become more assertive in criticising Russia's actions against Ukraine and has taken proactive measures. For example, Japan was one of the first states to join US-led sanctions on Russia, sanctioning individuals and institutions. Japan also expelled

nine Russian diplomats, revoked Russia's most-favoured-nation trade status and referred the situation in Ukraine to the International Criminal Court (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2022). Japan has also provided non-lethal aid and has accepted more than 1,300 refugees from Ukraine (Lee and Inuma 2002). Japan clearly aligned its position with that of the G7 in condemning Russia's invasion. This is particularly notable given Japan's past efforts to improve ties with Russia. For example, under Prime Minister Abe who was keen to resolve lingering territorial disputes with Russia, Japan was hesitant in criticising Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, responding with token sanctions.

For Japan, the reasons behind such an assertive posture are linked to the implications Russia's invasion has for the Indo-Pacific region. Prime Minister Kishida Fumio stated "Ukraine today may be East Asia tomorrow," with reference to the tensions surrounding the Taiwan Strait. According to Matsumoto Koichiro, Deputy Cabinet Secretary in the Japanese prime minister's office, Japan's proximity to Taiwan and the growing military disparity between China and Taiwan in favour of China makes the security of Taiwan a concern for Japan (Buddhavarapu 2022). By adopting a proactive posture in support of Ukraine, the underlying expectation is that the international community will also rally around Japan in the case of a future contingency in the region (Tsuruoka 2022).

Such a worldview has led Japan to reassess its own defence posture, with Kishida commenting that Japan's defence capabilities will be reinforced within the next five years, including a substantial increase of Japan's defence budget. In the process, Japan will be open to any option, including "counterstrike capabilities" (Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet 2022). In effect, Russia's invasion of Ukraine has strengthened Japan's rationale for greater military deterrence.

It is fair to say that Russia's invasion of Ukraine is not an important part of Seoul's calculus in terms of bilateral relations with Tokyo. (Regarding South Korea-US-Japan trilateralism, please see the next section.) Under Yoon, South Korea sees potential for improving bilateral links with Japan. And the South Korean president has made the point that shared values should underpin better relations with Tokyo (The Korea Times 2022). But this link has not been made with reference to the invasion of Ukraine explicitly, instead being put in the context of competition between different blocs. (See next section.)

Taken together, these developments have triggered NATO to expand its role into the Indo-Pacific region. Most notably, the Strategic Concept issued by NATO following the June 2022 summit identified Russia as "the most significant and direct threat to Allies' security," but it went on to label China as a "systemic" challenge. The Strategic Concept also labelled the Sino-Russian "deepening strategic partnership" as running counter to the organization's "values and interests." (NATO 2022a) To address this challenge, NATO vowed to "strengthen dialogue and cooperation" with its Indo Pacific partners (i.e., Australia, Japan, New Zealand, and South Korea) "to tackle cross-regional challenges and shared security interests" (NATO 2022a). Shortly before the summit and the launch of the Strategic Concept, South Korea had announced that it would establish a NATO mission (Kim 2022b). Thus, there was a confluence of interests between NATO and South Korea, specifically in South Korea's desire to deepen relations with NATO and NATO's interest in expanding its role in the Indo-Pacific region

South Korea's views about rivalry in the Indo-Pacific region

From a South Korean perspective, there is the potential that rivalry in East Asia may intensify as a result of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. In particular, South Korean government officials

have indicated that there is the risk that China, North Korea, and Russia will form a bloc confronting the US-led bloc, which includes South Korea.⁴ It should be stressed that at the time of writing, neither the Moon government in office until last May, nor the Yoon government in power since then have publicly expressed this position. This is a very sensitive issue, since South Korea would be on the frontline of any confrontation with the China-North Korea-Russia bloc. But the experts who have expressed this view regularly advise different governments formally or informally.⁵ This suggests that such a possibility is being discussed at the elite level.

Similarly, South Korean government officials have indicated that there is the potential for a new “Cold War” between a China-led bloc and a US-led bloc. While discussion about this potential Cold War preceded Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and is linked to developments such as trade tensions, technological competition, or a general military build-up, Russia’s actions are seen as part of this “Cold War.”⁶ This is because China is seen to have aligned with Russia and the Sino-Russian strategic partnership indicates a deeper level of cooperation between both. Yet, again it should be stressed that neither the Moon nor the Yoon governments officially refer to the Ukraine conflict in the context of a new Cold War-style rivalry between the US and China.

Furthermore, even though South Korea has not officially drawn any link between Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and the formation of blocs within East Asia, its public statements suggest that it has decided to side with “like-minded” partners to condemn Moscow’s actions. As part

⁴ Interview with South Korean government official, 26 April 2022; interview with South Korean government official, 3 August 2022.

⁵ On the role of experts with access to government influencing South Korean foreign policy, see Pacheco Pardo (2023).

⁶ Interview with South Korean government official, 26 April 2022; interview with South Korean government official, 3 August 2022.

of its trilateral meetings with the US and Japan, South Korea has condemned Russia's actions. This occurred under Moon even before the invasion of Ukraine (U.S. Department of State 2022c). It continued under Yoon once his government took office (U.S. Department of State 2022b). These statements have also condemned China's (alleged) aggressive behaviour, even if not by name. And the three countries have also condemned North Korea's development of its nuclear and missile programmes (U.S. Department of State 2022b, 2022c). South Korea has issued similar statements bilaterally with the US (U.S. Department of State 2022a). Implicitly, therefore, Seoul understands that there is growing rivalry within the region and that it has to work together with its preferred partners. The Russian invasion of Ukraine is one of the reasons exacerbating these tensions.

At the same time, there is no indication that Seoul believes that Russia's invasion of Ukraine can create opportunities for cooperation. (This includes South Korea-Japan bilateral relations; as stated above, Yoon's push to improve relations with Tokyo is unrelated to Russia's invasion of Ukraine.) The US has asked China to join in its condemnation of Russia or to at least stop "supporting" Moscow (Mauldin and Hutzler 2022). However, South Korea has not replicated the words of its ally. Furthermore, South Korea's calls to resolve the growing tensions between Russia and Ukraine "peacefully" prior to the actual invasion did not put any potential negotiations in the context of broader diplomatic efforts to which China could have been part (Lee 2022b). That is, South Korea has not drawn any links between Russia's invasion of Ukraine and regional frameworks for cooperation.

Overall, it seems that Russia's invasion of Ukraine is seen as part of a trend of a distancing between China and its partners on the one hand and the US and its own allies and partners, including South Korea, on the other. However, Seoul has not officially drawn any direct link

between Russia's actions and growing rivalry in East Asia. Rather, we can infer that South Korean policy-making elites and experts see Moscow's invasion of Ukraine as a symptom, and potential cause, of greater tensions in the region.

Impact of the war on regional alliances

South Korea has not expressed any official position regarding a direct link between Russia's war on Ukraine and the work of frameworks such as AUKUS or the Quad. It should be noted that South Korea is not a member of either of these two frameworks. Certainly, there are discussions about deepening cooperation with AUKUS. This is particularly the case in the context of South Korea's decades-old goal of acquiring nuclear-powered submarines (Choe 2021). Since South Korea has a strong alliance with the US and deepening security ties with Australia and the UK, there is scope for cooperation with AUKUS. For example, in July South Korean officials offered their Australian counterparts conventional submarines to close the gap until Canberra can deploy its first nuclear powered submarines (Dominguez 2022). This came on the back of Moon having signed South Korea's largest defence deal with Australia in December 2021 (Packham 2021).

Likewise, South Korea has been cooperating with the Quad dating back to at least 2019. Cooperation has been strongest in dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic, with Seoul attending several meetings on this issue. With the Quad poised to boost cooperation in areas such as infrastructure building, the fight against climate change, cyber-security, the development of critical and emerging technologies, or maritime security, there is scope to boost cooperation with South Korea and other partners (The White House 2022a). And indeed, the Yoon government has indicated its willingness to join the Quad (Kim 2022a). In particular, the Yoon

government believes that there are areas such as critical and emerging technology development or cyber-security in which there is a need for South Korea and the Quad to cooperate with each other, given South Korea's crucial role in the former or expertise in the latter when it comes to North Korea.⁷

However, it should also be noted that South Korea has taken note of the open division within the Quad regarding how to respond to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. In particular, India's decision to boost economic ties with Russia when Moscow has invaded a third country, while South Korea has decided to take an economic hit in common with the three other Quad members, is seen as an example of the limits of the grouping in creating a common security framework.⁸ Indeed, the May 2022 Quad Joint Leaders' Statement implicitly acknowledged these differences among its members (The White House 2022a).

In short, there is no indication that Seoul seeks Russia's invasion of Ukraine as a springboard to deepen cooperation with either of these two frameworks. (Or with ASEAN for that matter, which has not been discussed in South Korea in the context of Russia's aggression of Ukraine.) To begin with, AUKUS and the Quad target China and therefore relate to the security of the Indo-Pacific. None of their members has indicated that they also want the organizations to deal with Russia. In fact, India has split from the other three Quad members by failing to condemn Russia's invasion of Ukraine and actually boosting its economic links with Moscow following the invasion (Menon 2022). This has resulted in frictions between India and the US (Martin and Sen 2022). Thus, if anything Russia's invasion of Ukraine has weakened the security framework in the Indo-Pacific by opening a question about India's reliability as a partner of

⁷ Interview with South Korean government official, 3 August 2022.

⁸ Ibid.

the US and its allies. In this context, South Korea does not see how Russia's invasion of Ukraine can boost its links with AUKUS and the Quad.

Having said that, Russia's invasion of Ukraine has boosted South Korea's links with the US, Japan, and NATO, as shown in previous sections. Therefore, from Seoul's perspective Moscow's actions have strengthened regional alliances. In the case of the South Korea-US alliance and South Korea-US-Japan trilateral cooperation, geography dictates their importance for East Asia and the Indo-Pacific regions. In the case of NATO, the organization's growing focus on the Indo-Pacific as exemplified by cooperation with the four Asia/Indo-Pacific partners and the 2022 Strategic Concept demonstrates that it can become a subsidiary player in the region.

All in all, Seoul does not see Russia's invasion of Ukraine as a deal-breaker on regional alliances. After all, pre-existing frameworks target China, and South Korea is not a member of any of them to begin with. Yet, South Korea has boosted cooperation with the US bilaterally and with the US and Japan on a trilateral basis partly in relation to Russia's actions. Plus, closer links with NATO, including the provision of weapons to some of its members, are also linked to Moscow's invasion of Ukraine. Thus, bilateral and minilateral alliances and partnerships have strengthened following from the war.

Conclusion

Within an Asian context, South Korea is one of the few countries to have provided the most comprehensive support to Ukraine and its partners. In common with Japan or Taiwan, South Korea has condemned Russia, imposed sanctions on Moscow, and provided aid and non-lethal

military equipment to Kyiv. On top of that, South Korea has also transferred weapons to Ukraine to repel Russia's invasion, even if these transfers have come via third parties.

South Korea already indicated that it would provide support to Ukraine pre-invasion, as tensions between Moscow and Kyiv escalated. Diplomatic, economic, and military support then ensued once Russia invaded Ukraine. This support has continued over time as the war has dragged on. In fact, support increased during the Yoon government as South Korea provided weapons to Ukraine via third parties. At the time of writing, the indication is that Seoul will continue to support Kyiv for as long as necessary. This has brought some benefits for South Korea, but also important costs.

From the perspective of South Korea, Russia's actions have had an impact on the Indo-Pacific region. This is particularly the case in the way that the flashpoints of Taiwan and North Korea are perceived within the region. Yet, South Korea does not seem to believe that Sino-American rivalry or frameworks such as AUKUS or the Quad have been significantly impacted by the conflict in Ukraine. Yet, South Korea certainly has seen an increase in cooperation with the US, with the US and Japan trilaterally, and with NATO as a result of Russia's invasion of its neighbour.

We posit that South Korea's siding with Ukraine and, as a result, positioning against Russia is the result of its strong alliance with the US and growing security ties with other Western countries, its need to discourage North Korea from thinking about taking a similar action, and a wish to signal that similar developments in the region would be unwelcome. We also argue that values have driven South Korea's actions as well, given that both the Moon and Yoon

governments sided with fellow democracies against what they saw as an aggression against Ukraine's territorial integrity.

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List of interviews

Date	Place	Name	Organization	Title	Mode
25 February 2022	London	Anonymous	Ministry of Foreign Affairs	Deputy Chief of Mission	Telephone
26 February 2022	London	Anonymous	European External Action Service	Official	Telephone
26 April 2022	Seoul	Anonymous	Office of the President	Official	In person
3 August 2022	Seoul	Anonymous	Ministry of Foreign Affairs	Director- General	In person
10 August 2022	Seoul	Anonymous	Office of the President	Official	In person