

The Russia–South Korea Relationship after Russia’s Invasion of Ukraine and Implications for the U.S.-ROK Alliance

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This essay examines the potential for shifts in Russia's strategy toward the Korean Peninsula in light of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and South Korea's reaction.

MAIN ARGUMENT

For nearly 30 years, Russia has pursued a strategy of "diplomatic equidistance" toward the Korean Peninsula. By striving to maintain relatively balanced ties with both North and South Korea, the Kremlin has attempted to preserve a degree of influence on its eastern periphery in Northeast Asia, which is largely dominated by the U.S. and China. Pyongyang's and Seoul's respective responses to Russia's military aggression in Eastern Europe, however, have opened the possibility that Moscow could shift toward a strategy that favors North Korea over South Korea.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- Should Russia decide to pursue closer ties with North Korea at a time when Russia–South Korea relations have cooled, the Kremlin may find that supporting the North could increase its influence in Northeast Asia as well as present a challenge to the U.S. Nevertheless, Moscow would also risk losing the limited influence on the Korean Peninsula it has acquired as a result of its equidistance strategy.
- South Korea faces a period of uncertainty in relations with Russia since the invasion of Ukraine. While it is unlikely that Moscow and Seoul will enact the economic cooperation that they had previously envisioned, South Korea may hope to salvage ties with Russia to improve the balance on the Korean Peninsula. Yet with increased fears that North Korea–Russia relations may strengthen, South Korea has reason to be skeptical of cooperation.
- The U.S. will need to be prepared for several possible developments in terms of Russia's standing on the Korean Peninsula. Should South Korea elect to try to preserve cooperation with Russia, this may cause a further rift in the U.S.–South Korea alliance. If Moscow doubles down on its relationship with Pyongyang, Seoul and Washington will need to be prepared to jointly address such a development with implications for the Northeast Asian subregion and Russia-U.S. ties.

Developments on the westernmost edge of the Russian periphery have begun to exert an influence on Russia’s strategy toward its eastern flank. Namely, Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine has created the possibility that the Kremlin could undertake a significant shift in its nearly 30-year policy of diplomatic “equidistance” on the Korean Peninsula in favor of more explicit support for the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK, or North Korea). North Korea’s overt support for Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine has culminated in statements from Moscow and Pyongyang affirming their friendship and their intent to reshape the global order. Such fears have become increasingly prominent in Seoul, and they appear to inform a degree of reticence on the part of the Republic of Korea (ROK, or South Korea) in its support for Kyiv. Nevertheless, should the Kremlin shift toward a Korean Peninsula strategy more favorable to Pyongyang, Russia risks losing the limited influence it has been able to maintain there by preserving solid ties with both the DPRK and the ROK.

Whereas the DPRK and Russia have doubled down on their bilateral relationship since Moscow began prosecuting its war against Ukraine, Russia’s relations with the ROK have soured notably. In terms of any tilt toward Pyongyang, a positive or negative outcome for Russia will depend on whether Seoul opts to pursue greater strategic independence from the United States in the hopes of retaining the Kremlin’s support for inter-Korean reconciliation and DPRK denuclearization or instead continues to closely align with its U.S. ally in the latter’s great-power rivalry with Russia. As such, both South Korea and Russia face fundamental choices in how they want to approach their relationship. In the short term, Seoul under the Yoon Suk-yeol administration appears to be taking a clear pro-U.S. stance, even if it is one that falls short of the response Washington desires. Nevertheless, there are political forces within the ROK that prefer Seoul stake out a more ambiguous position, and South Korea’s continued commitment to pursuing Korean denuclearization—impossible without Russia’s help—could temper the ROK’s approach to Russia amid the currently unfolding geopolitical uncertainty.

This essay is organized as follows:

- ≈ pp. 98–100 examine Russia’s traditional policy of maintaining relatively equidistant and separate relations with both South and North Korea.
- ≈ pp. 100–103 assess the two Koreas’ responses to Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, noting the complications this has especially posed to South Korea, which needs to manage expectations from its U.S. partner and ally.
- ≈ pp. 103–6 consider how Russia–South Korea ties affect South Korea’s relationship and alliance with the United States.

- ≈ pp. 106–8 analyze Russia's interests in a weakened U.S.-ROK relationship and a greater role in Northeast Asian affairs.
- ≈ pp. 108–12 study the role of Russia in South Korea's national interest.
- ≈ pp. 112–13 conclude with implications for U.S. policymakers.

MOSCOW'S POST-COLD WAR EQUIDISTANCE ON THE KOREAN PENINSULA

In the immediate aftermath of the Cold War, Russia's primary strategic mistake regarding the Korean Peninsula was its failed attempt to abandon its solid relationship with North Korea in favor of closer ties with South Korea. DPRK-Russia relations deteriorated notably after Moscow, in the tumultuous transition from the Cold War to the post-Cold War era, attempted to improve its relationship with South Korea at the expense of ties with the North. Pyongyang's sense of betrayal, combined with South Korea's general disinterest in Russia in the 1990s, led to the Kremlin having no real levers of influence at all on the peninsula, especially compared with China and the United States. Ultimately, Russia learned a hard lesson and has been striving to restore its lost influence there ever since.¹

Among Russian experts, there has been the sense that the 2019 summit between Kim Jong-un and Vladimir Putin underscored Russia's continued importance in multilateral diplomacy on the Korean Peninsula.² South Korea's longtime willingness to pursue relations with this major strategic rival to the United States has been a boon to the Kremlin and its ability to maneuver in a geopolitical neighborhood where China and the United States vastly overshadow Russian influence. Nevertheless, in the context of multilateral diplomacy on dealing with North Korea's WMD possession and inter-Korean rapprochement, South Korea continues to place greater importance on Beijing's role than Moscow's, precisely because of Beijing's disproportionate

¹ Dmitrii Trenin, *Aziatskaia politika Rossii: Ot dvustoronnego podkhoda k global'noi strategii* [Russia's Asian Policy: From a Bilateral Approach to a Global Strategy], *Russie.Nei.Visions* 94 (Paris: Institut Français des relations internationales, 2016), 16 ≈ <https://www.ifri.org/ru/publications/notes-de-lifri/russieinevisions/aziatskaya-politika-rossii-ot-dvustoronnego-podhoda-k>.

² Artëm Lukin, "Vzgliady Rossiiskogo ekspertnogo soobshchestva na problemu denuklearizatsii Koreiskogo Poluostrova posle sammitov v Khanoe i Vladivostoke" [Views of the Russian Expert Community on the Problem of Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula after the Summits in Hanoi and Vladivostok], *Izvestiia vostochnogo instituta* 2, no. 42 (2019): 59.

influence in the DPRK.³ This has made pursuing as balanced relations as possible with both Koreas imperative to the Kremlin to maintain influence in an area on its eastern periphery where it is least able to independently affect diplomatic and geopolitical outcomes in its favor.

To be sure, much of the Kremlin's policy of equidistance is aimed at maintaining a foothold against Chinese influence as well. Given how Russia sees its relationship with China as a force multiplier in Moscow's relations with the United States,⁴ Russia has benefited from Chinese efforts to reduce U.S. influence on the Korean Peninsula. On issues such as missile defense, China and Russia both opposed the deployment of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) in South Korea. Russia's response to THAAD, however, was considerably milder than China's—unlike China, Russia did not engage in large-scale economic retaliation against the ROK. Although it was at Beijing's behest that Seoul ultimately agreed to the “three no's” on security cooperation with Japan and the United States, Russia also gained from such an arrangement.⁵ Russian scholars such as Aleksandr Zhebin have likened the formation of a Japan-ROK-U.S. security bloc to an extension of NATO on Russia's eastern flank.⁶ At the same time, China failed to change the ROK's course on the deployment of THAAD, while Beijing's heavy-handed economic reaction damaged ties between China and South Korea.

At least prior to 2022, South Korea's ties with Russia were mostly in a good state despite the THAAD crisis, no doubt because Russia's reaction to THAAD was comparatively modest. Sustaining positive relations with the ROK is a critical interest for the Russian government, which is desirous to foster strong ties with other East Asian states so as to balance against China.⁷ Indeed, it is currently in Russia's interest to maintain its state of diplomatic equilibrium between the two Koreas while working as much as possible to foster dialogue between them so that Russia can create a sort of neutral zone

³ Il'ia Ilur'evich Sinenko, “Perspektivy ‘povorota na Vostok’ v kontekste tekushchego geopoliticheskogo polozheniia Rossii v Severo-Vostochnoi Azii” [Prospects for a “Turn to the East” in the Context of Russia's Current Geopolitical Position in Northeast Asia], *Oikumena: Regionovedcheskie issledovaniia* 2, no. 37 (2016): 131.

⁴ Bobo Lo, “Global Order in the Shadow of the Coronavirus: China, Russia, and the West,” Lowy Institute, July 28, 2020, 14.

⁵ The “three no's” were an agreement on Seoul's part to refrain from installing additional THAAD components, to withhold support for the formulation of a Japan-ROK-U.S. trilateral alliance, and to abstain from participation in the U.S. missile defense network.

⁶ Aleksandr Zhebin, “Rossiia i ob'edinenie Korei” [Russia and the Unification of Korea], in “Doklad na IV forume ‘Dialog Rossiia–Respublika Koreia’” [Report at the Fourth Forum “Russia–Republic of Korea Dialogue”], St. Petersburg University, June 22, 2018, 2.

⁷ Marina Glaser and Pierre-Emmanuel Thomann, “The Concept of ‘Greater Eurasia’: The Russian ‘Turn to the East’ and Its Consequences for the European Union from the Geopolitical Angle of Analysis,” *Journal of Eurasian Studies* (2021): 4.

on the Korean Peninsula to limit both China's and the United States' influence on its eastern periphery.⁸

In spite of Russia's pursuit of so-called equidistance between Pyongyang and Seoul, however, economics have been a major area of potential cooperation between Russia and South Korea in ways that are unimaginable in the context of North Korea–Russia relations, given the multilateral sanctions against the DPRK. In 2021, Russia's imports from and exports to South Korea grew 11.6% and 109.0%, respectively. Between 1995 and 2020, Russia's exports to South Korea and South Korea's exports to Russia increased respectively at annualized rates of 8.25% and 7.14%.⁹ In April 2022, South Korean exports to Russia plummeted before making a steady recovery later in the year, albeit remaining around half the average value of exports to Russia prior to 2022.¹⁰ Similar to how policymakers in Seoul frequently highlight the national interest in maintaining decent ties with China, South Korea has its own concrete interest in continuing positive ties with Russia. As much as Moscow and Seoul have managed to compartmentalize their relationship from their respective relationships with Washington since the end of the Cold War, South Korea's recent actions signal a willingness to align with the West in opposition to the war in Ukraine at the expense of ties with Russia. As such, Seoul's decision not only is detrimental to Russia's interest in seeing South Korea less explicitly aligned with the United States but shows a degree of economic sacrifice on the part of South Korea, which has long reciprocated Russia's hope to develop solid economic ties.

THE TWO KOREAS' RESPONSES TO RUSSIA'S 2022 INVASION OF UKRAINE

Russia's military campaign against Ukraine has in many ways allowed for a belated reinvention of the North Korea–Russia relationship. Kim Jong-un's visit to Vladivostok for a summit in 2019, part of the DPRK's "era of summit diplomacy," occurred as a footnote in light of Kim's meetings with the leaders of China, South Korea, and the United States around that time. As the first direct meeting between the two leaders since Kim took power in 2011, the Vladivostok

⁸ Iul Chul Lim, "Rossiiskaia identichnost' i rol' Rossii na Koreiskom Poluostrove" [Russian Identity and Russia's Role on the Korean Peninsula], *Tetrad' po konservatizmu* 5 (2015): 89.

⁹ Observatory of Economic Complexity, "Russia and South Korea Trade," <https://oec.world/en/profile/bilateral-country/rus/partner/kor>.

¹⁰ Trading Economics, "South Korea Exports to Russia (October 2022 Data)," November 2022. <https://tradingeconomics.com/south-korea/exports-to-russia>.

summit laid the groundwork for an improved DPRK-Russia relationship. Any significant invigoration to the relationship the summit would have provided, however, was soon overshadowed in 2020 by North Korea's Covid-19-related border closure.

Nevertheless, the summit provided a reference point from which Moscow and Pyongyang could subsequently add momentum to their partnership. Phraseology promoting DPRK-Russia relations, such as that they have been “forged in blood,” has since appeared with increasing frequency from North Korea in official discourse.¹¹ When Moscow launched its invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, North Korea firmly supported Russia's decision, even going so far as to condemn subsequent developments such as the prospects of Finland and Sweden joining NATO. Given that the DPRK does not have a direct interest in the preservation or expansion of Russian geopolitical clout in the European continent, Pyongyang most likely sees supporting Russia as an effective way to garner support from Moscow at a time when ties between Pyongyang and Seoul have chilled.

Seoul's response, by contrast, has been more pro-Western and anti-Russian, albeit cautiously so. Volodymyr Zelensky has specifically thanked Australia and Japan—key U.S. allies in the Indo-Pacific—for their concrete support for Ukraine.¹² Conspicuous by its absence has been any mention of the ROK. Prior to the invasion, the South Korean foreign ministry issued statements expressing hopes that Kyiv and Moscow would find a diplomatic solution to their dispute while also announcing support for Ukraine's territorial integrity. After Russian troops entered Ukraine, the ROK foreign ministry condemned the invasion and vowed support for international economic measures implemented by other countries, such as the United States, to penalize and attempt to curb Russian aggression.

Initially, however, Seoul stopped short of introducing its own unilateral economic sanctions against Russia, in contrast to its neighbor Japan's more forceful measures, which included asset freezes and restrictions on exporting

¹¹ Park Hyonju, “Kimjongun-P'ut'in ch'ukchon kyohwan... 'panmi' kitpal arae milch'akhanun Puk-Chung-Ro” [Kim Jong un–Putin Exchange Congratulatory Messages, DPRK-China-Russia Unite under “Anti-U.S. Flag”], *Joongang ilbo*, August 15, 2021 ~ <https://www.joongang.co.kr/article/24128151#home>; and “Puk, Rosiae 'hyolmaeng' ongup... ' ch'inson kwan'gye, sae chonsonggi” [Mention of DPRK-Russia “Blood Alliance,” “Friendly Ties, a New Heyday”], *Donga ilbo*, April 25, 2022 ~ <https://www.donga.com/news/Politics/article/all/20220425/113056942/1>.

¹² Jesse Johnson and Kanako Takahara, “Zelenskyy Hails Japan's Stand Against Russia and Warns of Nuclear Threat to Ukraine,” *Japan Times*, March 23, 2022 ~ <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2022/03/23/national/politics-diplomacy/volodymyr-zelenskyy-japan-speech-parliament>; and “Speech by President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelenskyy in the Australian Parliament,” President of Ukraine Official Website. March 31, 2022 ~ <https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/promova-prezidenta-ukrayini-volodimira-zelenskogo-v-parlamente-73993>.

technological items such as the components needed for semiconductors. Based on government statements and deliberations in the lead-up to the invasion, South Korea's main concern seemed to be most focused on the potential economic fallout the ROK's export-oriented economy would suffer due to the war in Ukraine. This was particularly true given the fear that sanctions against Russia would affect the operations of South Korean firms in Russia. Nevertheless, within a week of the invasion, the South Korean foreign ministry, reportedly after consultations with the United States, announced a series of concrete unilateral economic measures against Russia. The measures, which drew protests from Moscow, included blocking the export of sensitive strategic materials to Russia as well as support for Russia's removal from the SWIFT global financial payments system.

Shortly thereafter, the U.S. Commerce Department included Indo-Pacific allies such as Australia and Japan, as well as all 27 European Union members, among countries exempt from having to seek waivers from the U.S. government before exporting potentially sensitive materials to Russia. South Korea was initially absent from the list. After talks with officials in Washington, however, South Korea's Ministry of Trade, Industry and Energy announced that the ROK had secured an exemption from the United States' foreign direct product rule, based on what Washington considered a strong alignment between U.S. policies and the unilateral export controls—including prohibitions on sales to organs such as the Russian Ministry of Defense—that Seoul had implemented. Thus, while it took some time for South Korea and the United States to be in sync in terms of economic measures toward Russia, Seoul and Washington ultimately demonstrated an ability to reach a mutual understanding in relatively short order. Nevertheless, this hardly papers over the fact that South Korean strategic alignment with the United States cannot be taken for granted or that South Korea's own interests toward Russia do not always coincide with U.S. policy objectives.

At a time when the United States has had to contend with Seoul's unwillingness to explicitly align itself with Washington and its Indo-Pacific allies against China, the ROK's response to Russian aggression in Ukraine—however belated—does underscore South Korea's willingness to align with the United States in a time of crisis, even one not directly related to the mandate of the U.S.-ROK Mutual Defense Treaty. To be sure, Russia's previous incursions into Ukrainian territory have caused hand-wringing in Seoul over how reliable a partner the United States really is. Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the tepid U.S. response, for example, prompted discussions about the United States' credibility and reliability as

an ally, including in scenarios concerning how China may act to enforce its interests on the Korean Peninsula and how Washington may (or may fail to) act.¹³

Seoul has, however, refrained from providing certain forms of aid to Ukraine, such as offensive weapons. Under the Moon Jae-in administration, Seoul refrained from providing arms to Ukraine, and the Yoon Suk-yeol administration appears to be continuing this track. This reluctance demonstrates that even while it will support the United States on issues of major importance outside of Northeast Asia, strategic discourse within the ROK is not as tightly aligned with that of the United States as policymakers in Washington may wish to believe. Indeed, it is precisely because of fears that South Korean support for Ukraine could result in Russia providing armaments to North Korea that the ROK has been reluctant to involve itself more deeply in direct aid to Ukraine.¹⁴

SOUTH KOREA AND THE PROSPECTS OF GREATER STRATEGIC INDEPENDENCE FROM THE UNITED STATES

Seoul's reluctance to commit to aiding Ukraine more fully, while issue-specific, is related to the increasing trend within ROK policymaking circles to consider alternatives to lockstep alignment with the United States. The idea that South Korea could potentially pivot away from its fundamental orientation toward the United States, all but unthinkable until recently, has gained considerably more traction within South Korean policymaking circles over the past several years.¹⁵ Whereas in the United States there is a strong narrative of the U.S.-ROK alliance being forged in war and based on shared values, Seoul has a more realist approach to the alliance.¹⁶ Particularly given

¹³ Seong-hyon Lee, "The Korean Angle on Crimean Fallout: America's Perception Gap," National Bureau of Asian Research, Commentary, April 22, 2014 ∞ <https://www.nbr.org/publication/the-korean-angle-on-crimean-fallout-americas-perception-gap>.

¹⁴ For recent examples of expressions of such fears from influential commentators, see Jeon Kyung-joo, "Pukhan-Rosia kongsaenggwa Hanbando anboe taehan wihom" [DPRK-Russia Symbiosis and the Threat to the Korean Peninsula's Security], Korean Institute for Defense Analysis, April 26, 2022 ∞ <https://www.kida.re.kr/frt/board/frtNormalBoardDetail.do?sidx=2184&idx=767&depth=2&lang=kr>; and Lee Tae-rim, quoted in "Chonmun'ga 'Han, UK'urae salssangmugi chegonghamyon Ro, Puke kunsajiwon" [Expert: "If South Korea Provides Lethal Weapons to Ukraine, Russia Will Provide Military Support to North Korea"], Newsis, May 2, 2022 ∞ https://newsis.com/view/?id=NISX20220502_0001856033.

¹⁵ Jeffrey Robertson, "Coming Soon: A Neutral South Korea?" Lowy Institute, Interpreter, November 4, 2020 ∞ <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/coming-soon-neutral-south-korea>.

¹⁶ Jeffrey Robertson, "South Korea: The Next Strategic Surprise?" East Asia Security Centre, Middle Power Conference Papers, no. 1, August 2020, 11.

the ongoing discussions about transferring wartime operational control (OPCON) of the ROK-U.S. Combined Forces Command to Seoul's authority (a goal that the recent administration of Moon Jae-in had promoted), the prospect of an ROK that stands prepared to assume greater responsibility for its own defense has led to speculation that either ally could subsequently walk away more easily from the alliance if either side judges it in the national interest.¹⁷ In light of this, ideas such as Seoul aligning more closely with China (seen in some circles not as a radical departure but as a historically ensconced option) or attempting to take advantage of geopolitical developments to forge a position of relative neutrality have become more popular among South Korean policymakers.¹⁸

The Russia-U.S. rivalry, geographically focused as it is on Eastern Europe, has also come to underscore the difficulties that South Korea faces in being able to pursue its own national interest vis-à-vis U.S. strategic competitors.¹⁹ There may arguably be merit in Seoul maintaining strategic ambiguity as a way of fostering both national and peninsular interests and avoiding a Cold War-style enmeshment in a pro-U.S. camp that undermines the ability to pursue positive relations with U.S. adversaries.²⁰ Indeed, the potential need to ensure South Korea does not become deadlocked in an arrangement that unduly tightens Seoul's diplomatic maneuverability is hardly limited to the China-U.S. rivalry. A more strategically independent South Korea, which would conceivably be friendly toward Russia given both countries' mutual economic interests and lack of overt geopolitical tensions, would reduce Moscow's need to align itself with Beijing to advance Russian interests in Northeast Asia.²¹ Furthermore, a more neutral ROK, perhaps one even less concerned about issues such as U.S. unilateral sanctions, would be a welcome development for Russia insofar as it could improve

¹⁷ Johannes Nordin, "Taking Back Control: South Korea and the Politics of OPCON Transfer," Institute for Security and Development Policy, Issue and Policy Brief, January 2020, 4.

¹⁸ Robertson, "South Korea: The Next Strategic Surprise?" 12–13.

¹⁹ "Uk'rainina sat'ae P'ut'inui oegyojollyakkwa TongAsia chollyakhwangyong pyonhwa" [The Situation in Ukraine, Putin's Diplomatic Strategy and Changes in East Asia's Strategic Environment], East Asia Institute, "Sumat'u Q&A int'obyu Shin Bomsik Kyosu Souldae" [Smart Q&A with Professor Shin Beom-shik, Seoul National University], March 31, 2014, 4–5.

²⁰ Gabyong Yang, "Chult'agi oegy'o pip'allon, tabak hogun chabak?" [Criticism of Tightrope Diplomacy—Balancing or Self-Criticism?], *National Security and Strategy* 21, no. 4 (2021): 2.

²¹ Lim, "Rossiiskaia identichnost' i rol' Rossii na Koreiskom Poluostrove," 89.

conditions for economic cooperation. This in turn could help balance out both Russia's and South Korea's heavy economic relationships with China.²²

To be sure, Seoul's response toward Russia's illegal actions in Ukraine in 2022, especially compared with its response to the annexation of Crimea eight years prior, undermines Moscow's hopes for South Korea to be less strategically oriented with the United States. In response to Seoul's decision to join in international economic sanctions, Russia's ambassador to South Korea, Andrei Kulik, lamented that after 30 years of a generally positive trajectory, the course of bilateral ties could shift for the worse. Should Russia continue to pressure Seoul to change course, relations will likely only worsen if, as discussed above, South Korea's diplomatic space to pursue strategic ambiguity is shrinking and Seoul maintains its policy of U.S. alignment as a matter of national interest. Such a decision would not come without geopolitical sacrifice for the ROK. Thus, policymakers in Washington cannot take it for granted that South Korea will not prioritize maintaining decent relations with Russia as in its national interest or that Seoul will not distance itself from Washington should it see fit.

The Yoon administration has so far put a pro-U.S. stance front and center in Seoul's foreign policy, as underscored by Yoon's presence at the June 2022 NATO summit in Spain. Nevertheless, forces in democratic South Korea could shift Seoul's position toward a more neutral, less explicitly pro-U.S. stance, similar to how the Yoon administration has sought to shift course after Moon's ambiguous stance left the ROK comparatively isolated. The notable disinterest among South Korean lawmakers when Zelensky appealed over video for help to the National Assembly and the prevalence, however limited, of a somewhat pro-Russian narrative in some quarters of South Korean society indicate a degree of public indifference to events in Ukraine.²³ Indeed, well into the start of Yoon's tenure, a solid majority of South Korean citizens believed Seoul should supply only humanitarian aid.²⁴ Furthermore, some influential figures on the political left, such as former National Diplomatic Academy chancellor

²² See Jung-Hoon Lee and Er-Win Tan, "North Korea's Nuclear and Human Rights Conundrum: Implications for South Korea's Unification Goal," *Pacific Focus* 35, no. 2 (2020): 293; and Alexander Vorontsov, "The Russian Perspective on Korean Unification," *Journal of Peace and Unification Studies* 5, no. 1 (2013): 257.

²³ Gi-Wook Shin, "In the Wake of Russia's Invasion of Ukraine, Korea Should Join Its Peers in Defending the Liberal International Order," Freedman Spogli Institute for International Studies, Stanford University, June 1, 2022 ~ <https://fsi.stanford.edu/news/wake-russia's-invasion-ukraine-korea-should-join-its-peers-defending-liberal-international>.

²⁴ Ryu Mina, "Kaellop: 'Kungmin 72%, Uk'urae pigunsajok chiwonman...kunsajiwon 15%' [Gallup: 72% of Koreans Support Only Nonlethal Support for Ukraine...15% Support Lethal Aid], Yonhap News Agency, June 24, 2022 ~ <https://www.yna.co.kr/view/AKR20220624102200001>.

Kim Joon-hyung, have called for Seoul to maintain a circumspect approach to great-power competition involving Russia and the United States.²⁵

RUSSIA'S INTEREST IN A WEAKENED U.S.-ROK RELATIONSHIP

Any gap in a broader political alignment between Seoul and Washington leaves the potential for Moscow to play upon on South Korean hesitancy at a strategic level. In the post-Cold War era, Northeast Asia has not traditionally received much consideration among U.S. policymakers insofar as strategic tensions with Russia are concerned. To be sure, there are also arguable limits to how interested Russia is in Northeast Asia as part of its broader foreign policy. Moscow's long neglect of the Russian Far East and Asia more generally combined with Northeast Asian countries' own secondary focus on the subregion in favor of a more global economic focus, to say nothing of North Korea's threat to subregional security, has contributed to Moscow's malaise toward fostering greater economic integration with Russia's eastern periphery and Northeast Asia.²⁶ Insofar as Asia is important to Russian policy, China will remain the top issue for policymakers in Moscow, with ties to Japan and South Korea subordinate.²⁷ Nevertheless, the Korean Peninsula geographically constitutes both a potential opening for enhancing Russian access to the Pacific Ocean and a point of strategic penetration for the United States into the eastern areas of Eurasia.²⁸ Furthermore, geopolitics on the Korean Peninsula are intimately tied to the security of the Russian Far East.²⁹

Russia views the United States' continued military presence on the peninsula as well as U.S.-ROK military exercises as perpetuating the threat of war. The status of U.S. forces on the peninsula is invariably tied to the state

²⁵ Kim Ji-Moon, "Chon kungniboegyowonjang, 'Miguk koinp'ulle... Ro-U chonjaeng kaurhyopsang chonmang" [Former National Diplomatic Academy Chancellor: Russia-Ukraine Compromise Possible This Winter Given U.S. Inflation], *Incheon Today*, July 26, 2022 ~ <https://www.incheontoday.com/news/articleView.html?idxno=220266>.

²⁶ Viktor Lavrent'evich Larin, "Tikhookeanskaia Rossiia v 'Bol'shoi Evrazii'" nachala XXI veka: Vyzovy i otvety" [Pacific Russia in "Greater Eurasia" of the Beginning of the 21st Century: Challenges and Answers], *Istoricheskaia i sotsial'no-obrazovatel'naiia mysl'* 10, no. 3-1 (2018): 70.

²⁷ Eugene Rumer and Richard Sokolsky, "Grand Illusions: The Impact of Misperceptions about Russia on U.S. Policy," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, June 30, 2021 ~ <https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/06/30/grand-illusions-impact-of-misperceptions-about-russia-on-u.s.-policy-pub-84845>.

²⁸ Khueilin' Tsao, "Geopoliticheskie strategii i chetyrekhugol'nika SShA Kitai Rossiia Iaponiia v otnoshe-nii ob'edineniia Koreiskogo Poluostrova" [Geopolitical Strategists and the Quadrangle of the U.S.-China-Russia- Japan in Relation to the Unification of the Korean Peninsula], St. Petersburg State University (final thesis, 2020), 24.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 33-34.

of political rapprochement between Pyongyang and Seoul. Though the United States was skeptical of efforts toward the end of the Moon administration to declare a formal end to the Korean War, some high-profile Russian scholars, such as Aleksandr Zhebin of the Russian Academy of Sciences, have argued that refraining from signing a peace treaty that formally ends the Korean War provides the United States with a pretext to maintain military forces in close proximity to Russia.³⁰ In addition, aside from military considerations, the perpetuation of tensions on the peninsula undermines the prospects for greater connectivity between it and the Russian Far East, further negating Russia's ability to assert itself as an Asia-Pacific power. The combination of reduced or withdrawn U.S. forces and potentially the peninsula's increased connectivity to the Eurasian landmass would raise Russia's influence while diminishing U.S. leverage.³¹

South Korea's U.S. alliance has long undermined the country's ability to pursue deeper cooperation with Russia to a certain degree. While the ROK's value for Russia is primarily economic, Moscow would also benefit from the pursuit of closer security ties or a multilateral security mechanism, one that could potentially reduce South Korea's need for the U.S. alliance.³² Russia, for its part, has compartmentalized its relationship with the ROK, given its tensions with the United States.³³ In turn, South Korea could potentially benefit from Russia's cooperation on denuclearizing North Korea, and as such, it would help the ROK if Moscow and Washington would separate their geopolitical discord in Eastern Europe from a more constructive relationship in Northeast Asia.³⁴

Given how the U.S.-ROK alliance affects mutual interest in shoring up bilateral relations, Moscow would most certainly welcome South Korean initiatives to avoid any explicit framework against Russia (i.e., a

³⁰ Aleksandr Zhebin, "Koreiskii poluostrov v meniaiushchemsia geopoliticheskom rasklade" [The Korean Peninsula in a Changing Geopolitical Situation], in *Koreiskii poluostrov v poiskakh mira i protsvetaniia*, vol. 1 (Moscow: Institute of the Far East of the Russian Academy of Sciences, 2019), 39.

³¹ Patrick Cronin, "Geopolitical Implications of Diplomatic Failure with North Korea," in "Geopolitical Implications of a New Era on the Korean Peninsula," ed. Nobumasa Akiyama, Patrick M. Cronin, Abraham M. Denmark, and Yoshihide Soeya, Wilson Center, 2019 ~ <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/geopolitical-implications-new-era-the-korean-peninsula>.

³² Andrei Borisovich Volynchuk, "K voprosu o povyshenii geopoliticheskogo statusa Rossii v Severo-Vostochnoi Azii" [On the Issue of Increasing the Geopolitical Status of Russia in Northeast Asia], *Teoriia i praktika obshchestvennogo razvitiia* 20 (2015) ~ http://teoria-practica.ru/rus/files/arhiv_zhurnala/2015/20/politics/volynchuk.pdf.

³³ Lim, "Rossiiskaia identichnost' i rol' Rossii na Koreiskom Poluostrove," 86.

³⁴ See Dongju So and Sangjun Lee, "P'ut'in chipkwon 4 ki Rosiaui tongbuga Hanbando chongch'aek kwa han Ro oeyo kyonghyobui kwaje" [Russia's Policy on Northeast Asia and the Korean Peninsula in the 4th Period of Putin's Reign and the Tasks of Diplomatic and Economic Cooperation between Korea and Russia], *Rosiyon'gu* 28 (2018): 132.

Cold War-style division into a China–North Korea–Russia camp and a Japan–South Korea–U.S. entente). Russia, however, has little ability to influence the course of geopolitical events on its eastern periphery, a fact that challenges Russia's ability to claim itself a great power overall. As such, Russia has a decided interest not only in the economic modernization and connectivity of the Russian Far East but in restructuring Northeast Asia's security architecture so that U.S. influence and alliance power are diminished.³⁵

RUSSIA IN SOUTH KOREA'S NATIONAL INTEREST

South Korea has an established interest in maintaining solid working ties with Russia. Unburdened by any significant or historically rooted tensions, South Korea has long taken a particularly forward-looking view toward cooperation with Russia, perceiving the potential to connect the ROK to the Eurasian landmass (especially if the two Koreas were to unify). Greater infrastructure connections would subsequently allow South Korea to play an increased regional role by combining its technological prowess with improved geographic connectivity and access to Russia's abundant energy resources.³⁶ In this regard, the ROK views Russia not necessarily as a threat or an impediment to sovereignty but as a means to enable South Korea to punch above its weight in regional affairs. The consistency with which the ROK has pursued policies to integrate more closely with Russia underscores Seoul's interest both in deepening its orientation toward the Eurasian continent (even as far afield as Eastern Europe) as opposed to being primarily maritime-oriented and in breaking out of the relatively limited scope of East Asia to engage in a greater role in Eurasia as a whole.³⁷ Naturally, given Russia's geographic expanse and proximity to the Korean Peninsula, the bilateral relationship with Russia had concurrently served Seoul's interests in the Northeast Asian subregion and a broader Eurasian scope.

Under the Moon administration, one of Seoul's signature foreign policy initiatives was the New Northern Policy. Although this policy was primarily

³⁵ Stephen Blank, "Is Russia a Great Power in Asia?" in *Great Powers and Geopolitics*, ed. Aharon Klieman (Cham: Springer, 2015), 167–68.

³⁶ Sangnam Park, "Rosiaui Yurasia chollyakkwa Han-Ro hyomnyok—chibangjach'idanchè kan kyongjehyomnyogul chungsimuro" [Russia's Eurasian Strategy and Korea-Russia Cooperation—With Reference to the Economic Cooperation of the Inter-Local Governments], *Analyses and Alternatives* 3, no. 1 (2019): 18.

³⁷ M.A. Bulanakova, "Evraziiskii vektor vneshnei politiki Respubliki Koreia: Faktor Tsentral'noi Azi" [The Eurasian Vector of the Foreign Policy of the Republic of Korea: The Central Asia Factor], *Evraziiskaia integratsiia: Ekonomika, pravo, politika* 4, no. 34 (2020): 73–74.

economic in nature, and hazy in terms of whether it would foster the peace process or only be fully realized after inter-Korean peace, it also had a strong security bent based on the notion that greater economic connectivity between North Korea, Russia, and South Korea could help promote peace on the peninsula.³⁸ Under the new presidential administration, and particularly given the Ukraine war, it is unlikely that any sort of large-scale economic cooperation with Russia, either as a continuation of the New Northern Policy or as a separate initiative, is a veritable possibility for the foreseeable future.

While prospects for economic collaboration between Russia and South Korea have been dampened, an additional factor that will affect the Russia–South Korea–U.S. triangle is the question of denuclearization. Although Yoon had called for the reintroduction of U.S. nuclear assets in the ROK during his campaign, so far the government remains committed to pursuing the denuclearization of the peninsula.³⁹ In this regard, Russia's standing will depend on the extent to which Moscow can persuade Seoul that the Kremlin is a valuable partner for fostering conditions that will allow the ROK to be at the forefront of Korean denuclearization discussions as opposed to being a subordinate of the United States. Russia could also play a more active facilitator role; many experts and officials in South Korea believe that Russia could execute a crucial role in issues such as denuclearization and improved inter-Korean relations, even to the point that Moscow could be an agreeable mediator between the two Koreas.⁴⁰

Moscow, for its part, is particularly sensitive about being excluded from any multilateral efforts on Korean security, especially because of its exclusion from the original four-party talks.⁴¹ Although Russia was eventually invited to participate in what evolved into the six-party talks, its influence in multilateral negotiations over the DPRK's nuclear weapons program has

³⁸ Yongu Na and Lee Ut'ae Lee, "Sinnambangjongch'aek—Sinbukpangjongch'aegui kongdong mokpy'owa chollyakkwaje" [Joint Goals and Strategic Tasks of the New Southern Policy and New Northern Policy], in "Sinnambangjongch'aek Sinbukpangjongch'aek ch'ujinjollyakkwa chongch'aekkwaje" [Strategies and Policy Tasks for Promoting the New Southern Policy and New Northern Policy], Korean Institute of National Unification, no. 20–14, 2020, 233.

³⁹ "Yoon Says He Will Request Redeployment of U.S. Tactical Nukes in Case of Emergency," Yonhap News Agency, September 22, 2021 ~ <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20210922005300320>; and "South Korean Leader: Seoul Won't Seek Own Nuclear Deterrent," Voice of America, August 17, 2022 ~ <https://www.voanews.com/a/south-korean-leader-seoul-won-t-see-own-nuclear-deterrent-/6704933.html>.

⁴⁰ Tatyana Zamakhina, "Rossiia, Koreia i KNDR mogut nachat' prarobotku sovmestnykh proektov" [Russia, South Korea and the DPRK May Begin Developing Joint Projects], *Rossiiskaia gazeta*, May 28, 2019 ~ <https://rg.ru/2019/05/28/rossiia-koreia-i-kndr-mogut-nachat-prarobotku-sovmestnykh-proektov.html>; and "Eksperty otsenili rol' Rossii v mezhKoreiskom dialoge" [Experts Assess Russia's Role in Inter-Korean Dialogue], RIA News, April 21, 2020 ~ <https://ria.ru/20200421/1570379909.html>.

⁴¹ So and Lee, "P'ut'in chipkwon 4 ki Rosiaui tongbuga Hanbando chongch'aekkwaha han Ro oegyo kyonghyobui kwaje," 124.

weakened considerably since the collapse of the six-way discussions, as exemplified by the fact that Russia was not mentioned in the 2018 Panmunjom Declaration between the two Korean governments.⁴² Even so, South Korean diplomats were actively engaged with Russian officials regarding Korean denuclearization prior to 2022. In May 2021, the chairperson of the ROK's National Assembly, Park Byeong-seug, traveled to Moscow for a series of high-profile meetings with the chairperson of the Russian legislature's upper chamber, Valentina Matvienko, as well as several of Moscow's most experienced Korea hands. Russian experts emphasized the importance, from Russia's view, of the resumption of direct U.S.-DPRK dialogue.⁴³ Matvienko asserted the importance of the Korean Peninsula holds for Russia-U.S. relations, while also insisting that both Russia and the United States need to respect South Korea's position on the denuclearization of the peninsula.⁴⁴

Views in Moscow and Washington that Korean security is part of a broader Russia-U.S. strategic relationship stand in contrast to the manner in which Seoul tends to view peninsula security as a primarily regional, rather than strategic, issue.⁴⁵ Just as Seoul had been actively engaged with Moscow in 2021 over Korean denuclearization, Washington likewise maintained official contact with Moscow over Korean security affairs.⁴⁶ South Korea is well aware of how the state of the Russia-U.S. bilateral relationship affects Seoul's relationships with both governments. At the same time, from Seoul's perspective, cooperation with Russia over denuclearization need not be a zero-sum endeavor in terms of U.S.-ROK relations. That most Russia-U.S. tensions are geographically located in Eastern Europe and the Middle East

⁴² Yulia Olegovna Medvedeva, "Rossiisko-Iuzhnokoreiskie otnosheniia: Perspektivy i vyzovy" [Russia-South Korea Relations: Prospects and Challenges], *Koreevedenie v Rossii: Napravlenie i razvitie* 2, no. 1 (2021): 103.

⁴³ Jun-ho Park, "Rosia chonjik nambuk taesadul 'Pungmi taehwa haedo pihaekhwa swipchi anha'" [Former Russian Ambassadors to DPRK and ROK "Even If North Korea and the U.S. Talk, Denuclearization Won't Be Easy"], *Newsis*, May 25, 2021 ~ https://www.newsis.com/view/?id=NI SX20210525_0001451685.

⁴⁴ Hwak-jin Na, "Rosia sangwonuijang 'Ro-Mi hoedamso mujogon Hanbando munje nonui'" [Chair of Russia's Federation Council "Russia and the U.S. Will Definitely Discuss Issues on the Korean Peninsula"], *Yonhap News Agency*, May 26, 2021 ~ <https://www.yna.co.kr/view/AKR20210526048000001>.

⁴⁵ Jong Kun Choi and Chung-in Moon, "Understanding Northeast Asian Regional Dynamics: Inventory Checking and New Discourses on Power, Interest, and Identity," *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 10, no. 2 (2010): 364.

⁴⁶ Anthony Rinna, "Russia and China Are Not a Monolith When It Comes to North Korea," *NK News*, May 26, 2021 ~ <https://www.nknews.org/pro/russia-and-china-are-not-a-monolith-when-it-comes-to-north-korea>.

has traditionally meant that Seoul may have some ability to cooperate with Russia on denuclearization without upsetting the United States.⁴⁷

How this cooperation will work given the sharp downturn in Russia-U.S. ties as well as the recent chill in Russia-ROK relations after the Ukraine war will be crucial in determining whether it is worth Seoul's effort to remain engaged with Moscow over Korean denuclearization under the current circumstances. Should Russia remain engaged in denuclearization discussions, Moscow and Seoul may potentially face a key disagreement in whether complete denuclearization is desirable or even feasible, as the Kremlin appears to favor placing controls over the DPRK's existing nuclear arsenal. But fundamentally, South Korea's ability to work between the two powers will continue to hinge in part on the degree of policy alignment between Russia and the United States over Korean security matters.

Months into the Russia-Ukraine war at the time of writing, prospects for any cooperative Russian role in Korean denuclearization have grown dim. Russian officials appear increasingly willing to flout international sanctions on North Korea, with senior Russian officials and members of the legislative branch openly discussing the possibility of hiring large numbers of North Korean citizens to work in Russia—a clear violation of UN restrictions.⁴⁸ Additionally, Russia's willingness to disregard UN sanctions appears to be part of a coordinated effort with China to allow North Korea to act as a regional spoiler. This can be gleaned from statements after February 2022 from Chinese premier Xi Jinping, in which Beijing expressed its view, shared by Moscow, that U.S.-led alliances are dangerous, and China's little evident interest in curbing North Korea's nuclear threat.⁴⁹

Furthermore, in light of the current frostiness between Moscow and Seoul since the Ukraine war began, the question of cooperation with Russia over denuclearization may take on a greater significance for South Korean national identity. For Russia, North Korea's possession of nuclear weapons does not enhance the DPRK's reputation but rather creates a broadly negative view of North Korea across most of the world. Yet this negative view of a DPRK with nuclear and WMD capabilities also enhances the United States' geopolitical position in that the United States assumes a leadership role in

⁴⁷ Sun-woo Lee, "Rosia 'P'ut'in' ch'ej'e'ui hyonjaewa mirae (?) kurigo Hanbando" [The Present and Future (?) of Russia's "Putinism" and the Korean Peninsula], *JPI Research Series* (2020): 6–7.

⁴⁸ Anthony V. Rinna, "Annexing Ukraine's Land Makes Clear Russia Won't Cooperate on North Korea," *NK Pro*, September 30, 2022 ~ <https://www.nknews.org/pro/annexing-ukraines-land-makes-clear-russia-wont-cooperate-on-north-korea>.

⁴⁹ Stephan Haggard, "Korea, Ukraine and Russia III: The End of Illusions?" *Korea Economic Institute*, July 8, 2022 ~ <https://keia.org/the-peninsula/korea-ukraine-and-russia-iii-the-end-of-illusions>.

pushing for Korean disarmament.⁵⁰ Should Russia–South Korea ties degrade to such an extent that cooperation on Korean denuclearization becomes increasingly unlikely, then the ROK could be pulled more firmly into the liberal camp of states interested in denuclearization set against increasingly close Russia-DPRK relations. In fact, as disappointing for Washington as the ROK’s response to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine may have been (and may continue to be), South Korea has taken a more decisive stance than India, a country that, while not a treaty ally, plays a crucial role in the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy. It is arguably because of the major threats that China and Pakistan pose to India’s security that New Delhi has taken a neutral, if not slightly pro-Russian, stance for fear of alienating Moscow.⁵¹ If South Korea has little reason to expect Russia to play a constructive role in Korean denuclearization, the ROK will have all the more reason to take a more decisive, pro-U.S. stance toward Russia (and against a China-DPRK-Russia axis).

CONCLUSION

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has set the stage for a potential shift in Russia’s strategy toward the Korean Peninsula, which could in turn affect shifts in Seoul’s approach to both Russia and the U.S.–Russia strategic rivalry. The main implications for the United States are twofold. First, Washington must start to seriously consider that despite Russia’s weakness in the Indo-Pacific, the Korean Peninsula may increasingly become a front for Russia-U.S. strategic rivalry. Although not necessarily a primary concern for the United States, the Kremlin may perceive U.S. attempts to build and maintain influence around Russia’s eastern periphery, including on the Korean Peninsula, as part of a wider strategic goal of denying, or at least diminishing, Russia’s ability to exercise influence in its Northeast Asian peripheral areas.⁵² Given that a strong relationship with the then-new DPRK was an important lever for Soviet influence in Northeast Asia during the Cold War,⁵³ Moscow

⁵⁰ A.B. Volynchuk and Iu. V. Andreeva, “Problemy i perspektivy ob’edinenie stran Koreiskogo Poluoostrova: Opyt geopoliticheskoi ekspertizy,” *Vestnik Cheliabinskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta* 23, no. 314 (2013): 39.

⁵¹ Ashley J. Tellis, “‘What Is in Our Interest’: India and the Ukraine War,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, April 25, 2022 ≈ <https://carnegieendowment.org/2022/04/25/what-is-in-our-interest-india-and-ukraine-war-pub-86961>.

⁵² See S. Trifonov, “Kamchatka v sisteme geopoliticheskoi bezopasnosti Rossii: Teoreticheskii aspekt” [Kamchatka in the System of Russia’s Geopolitical Security: The Theoretical Aspect], *Vestnik Kamchatskogo gosudarstvennogo tekhnicheskogo universiteta* 3 (2004): 210.

⁵³ See Edmund A. Walsh, “Soviet Geopolitics and Strategy,” *Naval War College Information Service for Officers* 4, no. 1 (1951): 12.

may respond at this juncture to Pyongyang's ongoing overtures by viewing North Korea as a strategic asset in the Russia-U.S. rivalry.

Second, the United States will need to gauge South Korea's willingness and desire to cooperate with Russia on aspects of ROK national interest. Washington must be prepared for the possibility that elements of Seoul's strategic ambiguity and longtime willingness to pursue cooperative relations with the Kremlin will inform South Korean policymakers' approach to Russia. Conversely, if the increasingly expressed fears in Seoul that Moscow may boost support for North Korea come to pass, Washington and Seoul will need to work out how the alliance can respond, such as to what extent the ROK can match weaponry Russia may provide to North Korea, or how joint U.S.-ROK cyber cooperation can respond to North Korean cyber offensives executed with Russian support.

Ultimately, policymakers and other stakeholders in regional geopolitics will need to watch for Russia's willingness to forgo its inter-Korean equidistance for greater support for North Korea. This move could either strengthen Russia's position in Northeast Asia by positioning the DPRK as a strategic asset or weaken Moscow's standing should a return to emphasizing relations with Pyongyang translate into taking an even further backseat to China. Likewise, Washington will need to measure Seoul's willingness to attempt to salvage its relationship with Russia, which will in large part depend on to what extent Moscow maintains an approximate status quo in its approach to the peninsula. However, regardless of whether Russia or South Korea makes the first move in any shift in their bilateral relationship—Moscow supporting Pyongyang, or Seoul extending an olive branch to Moscow—the United States will need to be prepared to adapt and respond. Northeast Asia is for certain no longer as insulated from the shocks of geopolitical developments in Eastern Europe as it once was, nor can the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy ignore the Russia factor in the region. ◆

