

North Korea and the Russia-Ukraine War

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What implications does the Russia-Ukraine War have for North Korea? North Korea has repeatedly expressed its views over the war – the North Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs’ statement released on February 28 is especially of note. Its stance on the situation can be summarized into the following four points: (1) The root cause of the Ukraine crisis lies in U.S. and the West’s hegemonic strategy. (2) Russia’s demands are reasonable and just; on the contrary, the U.S. and the North Atlantic Alliance (NATO) have escalated the crisis by moving eastward, threatening Russia. (3) It is absurd for the U.S. to discuss maintaining respect for Ukraine’s sovereignty and territorial integrity when it destroyed Afghanistan and Libya. (4) The “double standards” of the U.S. pose a threat against international peace. On top of that, the ministry also showed its support towards Russia in an article titled “Legitimate Choice,” stating that “no matter how strong the sanctions, threats, or intimidations, they can never change Russia’s choice to protect its national security and interests.”

North Korea’s perception and response to the war in Ukraine is unsurprising and does not exceed our expectations. Pyongyang has consistently argued against U.S. hegemony and its double standards. However, North Korea’s claim reads as a lame excuse for its support towards Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. Why has it not criticized Russia’s infringement of sovereignty and military invasion? Does it view sovereignty and territorial integrity with double standards? North Korea has long believed that “if a country facing the threat of a great power gives up its nuclear weapons, no one will guarantee its security.” While Pyongyang did not officially state so, the war in Ukraine provided an opportunity for it to reaffirm the legitimacy of its claims.

The war in Ukraine will heavily influence North Korea’s perception of denuclearization and a peace regime on the Korean Peninsula. First of all, Pyongyang views that denuclearization, once complete, is irreversible and that it would weaken its ability to deter threats from neighboring powers. Second, it views that it is unrealistic and naïve to adhere to the policy that neighboring countries will guarantee peace. In some ways, the current state of Ukraine can be considered parallel to that of North Korea. To illustrate, the nullification of the Memorandum on Security Assurances, associated with

Ukraine's accession to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (1994 Budapest Memorandum), the Ukrainian version of a peace treaty, led North Korea to believe that an end-of-war declaration and a peace regime on the Korean Peninsula is no guarantee for security.

As soon as Ukraine became independent after the dissolution of the Soviet Union in December 1991, Ukraine, along with Kazakhstan and Belarus, had nuclear warheads deployed by the Soviet Union on its own territory. Considering historical geo-political tensions between Ukraine and Russia, a nuclear Ukraine emerged as a major concern in the international community. Many were unsettled by the prospects of Ukraine's nuclear possession after independence. It was not easy for it, unlike Belarus and Kazakhstan, to give up its nuclear arsenals and denuclearize. Kyiv debated over the possession of nuclear weapons. Since Ukraine became independent with no adequate preparations in place, it was domestically severely instable. National tasks concerning political stability, economic development, and national unity were left unaddressed. Amid such chaos, support from Russia and the U.S. became a key issue. This meant that the possession of nuclear weapons would worsen Ukraine's relations with the two superpowers. To this end, Kyiv concluded that the possession of nuclear weapons would not only pose a security threat, but also seriously undermine national interests at home and abroad by triggering military and economic sanctions from the international community. Ultimately, Ukraine signed the Lisbon Protocol in May 1992 and ratified the Strategic Arms Reduction Agreement (START). Then, on December 5, 1994, it signed the Budapest Memorandum at a conference of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). The Budapest Memorandum promised Ukraine political and military security guarantees from the U.S. and Russia on the basis of denuclearization.

However, Russia crushed over Ukraine's long-standing efforts to denuclearize and establish a peace regime. This is likely to deteriorate North Korea's perception of denuclearization and peace regime talks. It is worth noting that the 1994 Budapest Memorandum included clauses assuring respect for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity, while prohibiting the use of military force and the threat of nuclear weapons. None of them were observed by Russia.

Furthermore, the situation in Ukraine will cause considerable difficulties in enforcing sanctions against North Korea. For example, despite North Korea's recent provocation of an ICBM-class missile launch, the United Nations (UN) Security Council has been unsuccessful in imposing additional sanctions due to Russian (and possibly Chinese) veto power. Even before the war in Ukraine, sanctions enforced by the international community were weakened by Russian and Chinese opposition against additional sanctions and demand for sanctions relief. As such, the war in Ukraine, combined with the exacerbation of U.S.-China relations, will diminish the effectiveness of North Korean sanctions. Russia, recently hit with a series of heavy economic sanctions due to its invasion of Ukraine, will complicate the resolution of the North Korean issue. Therefore, additional sanctions on North Korea, if implemented, would be unilaterally imposed by the U.S. and the West, instead of the UN Security Council.

After all, it seems unfeasible to find a new breakthrough in North Korean denuclearization talks as long as the Ukraine crisis persists. U.S.-North Korea negotiations on denuclearization have been at a stalemate since 2020. North Korea started a long-term hold-out strategy on a plethora of domestic and foreign issues, insisting on a "heads-on breakthrough." Meanwhile, the Biden

administration maintained its de facto policy of “strategic patience,” which was Obama’s North Korea policy, essentially equal to a “wait-and-see” approach. While Washington remains focused on the Ukraine crisis, Pyongyang is likely to feel relatively left out. It is possible that North Korea will initiate a series of military provocations to bring U.S. attention back on the Korean Peninsula and use the war in Ukraine as an opportunity to further strengthen its position.

North Korea is also likely to take a tougher stance on inter-Korean relations and become more reluctant against breaking the stalemate and returning to the negotiation table. North Korea will continue to negatively respond to South Korea’s proposals on various inter-Korean cooperation policies. Pyongyang has already taken a lukewarm attitude toward the end-of-war declaration and will possibly voice greater criticism against the declaration following the Ukraine crisis. In addition, Pyongyang has consistently argued that security agreements such as the Budapest Memorandum can collapse anytime. Even if the new South Korean government proposes a security guarantee and inter-Korean cooperation, North Korea may not accept it. North Korea also remains hostile against agendas for humanitarian cooperation such as the supply of COVID-19 vaccines and humanitarian aid. This is evident given Kim Yo-jong, Deputy Director at the Central Committee of the North Korean Workers’ Party and Kim Jong-un’s sister, heavily disparaged the U.S. and South Korea.

If North Korea conducts military provocations and the West imposes additional sanctions, denuclearization talks and inter-Korean relations will inevitably remain strained. Pyongyang’s calculations of the Russia-Ukraine war are very complicated, but it will continue to reiterate its previous arguments and policies as usual. The war in Ukraine will obfuscate the international community’s efforts in dealing with North Korea. ■

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