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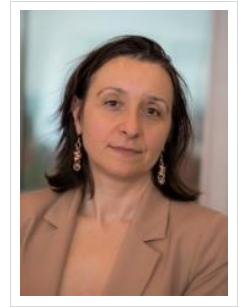
U.S.–China Nuclear Competition Research ③

The Ukraine War and Its Repercussions on East Asia Security and Stability

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On February 24, 2022, the post-World War II world order ceased. What comes next is unclear, but all signs point to a more unstable, unpredictable international landscape where brute force and military superiority are the ordering principles. The Russian invasion of Ukraine, inevitably and inexorably, will bear immense consequences for what once was a rule-based global order. Let me highlight the main four.

First, the Ukraine war has sparked what the United Nations has called a complex emergency, where multiple crises, including food, energy, and security, are unfolding concurrently and at a very rapid pace worldwide. Second, the invasion of Ukraine has further amplified the centrality of nuclear weapons in the 21st-century strategic landscape. Third, it has brought China, India, and the Russian Federation's "friendship" into greater focus. Fourth, it has encouraged countries like Iran and North Korea to continue expanding their illicit military technology exports.

All these factors will play a vital role in Asia. How the Asian countries will choose to manage them will very much determine the prospects for peace and security in the region and beyond.

1. The Ukraine War and the Crisis of Global Governance

There is little doubt that the Ukraine war has devastating effects beyond the European borders.

Despite their secondary position in the world economy, Russia and Ukraine are the leading producers of essential agricultural products, including sunflower meal, oil, and seeds. As we near the one-year mark of the Russian invasion, future harvests remain questionable, and global agricultural commodity prices will continue to soar. After only six months of the war, the World Food Programme estimated that "acute hunger will grow by an additional 47 million people from a pre-war baseline of 276 million people suffering from acute hunger. This indicates that up to 323 million people may face severe food insecurity by 2022. According to World Bank estimates, every one percentage point rise in food prices pushes 10 million people into severe poverty. If food costs remain this high for a year, global poverty might rise by more than 100 million."

This catastrophic humanitarian situation might spare many of the Asian countries who, traditionally, grow and consume their food or export and trade with their more proxy neighbors. Yet, at the global level, the need to respond and address an inexorable hunger crisis and mitigate as much as possible any further disruption in the agricultural exports from Russia and Ukraine will constrain the role of the United Nations as a mediator in this conflict. Just recently, the U.N. Secretary-General appeared cautious in supporting any other resolution against Russia, fearing that such an action would jeopardize his ability to bring the parties together for a possible ceasefire.

In addition, and perhaps most importantly, this complex emergency today has brought to light the intrinsic institutional weaknesses of the United Nations system and the profound ideological divisions that exist within the international community. It has paralyzed the U.N. Security Council and overshadowed the agenda of the U.N. General Assembly. It has also spilled over other international forums, including COP27 and the International Atomic Energy Agency Board of Governors, where issues of critical importance to much of the Global South continue to be addressed.

As the war drags, the risk for the U.N. and many global institutions is to lose credibility and trust among member-states and be condemned to an institutional limbo and political

irrelevance that will be difficult to overcome especially in regions like Asia, facing impending political and security crises.

2. The Invasion of Ukraine Has Further Amplified the Centrality of Nuclear Weapons in the 21st-century Strategic Landscape

Growing competition between the United States and China and an accelerating technology and military arms race were already ongoing well before February 24, 2022. Nuclear weapons came back in the U.S. Nuclear Posture Review of the Trump Administration in 2018. China and the Russian Federation had invested in exotic strategic weapons long before this conflict began. Yet, Ukraine has further amplified the role of nuclear weapons in the emerging security landscape. For once, just one week into the war, President Putin decided to put Russian nuclear forces on higher alert. Although no operational changes resulted from this, fear of possible nuclear weapons use soared among European societies and policymakers.

Yet, most importantly, the Ukraine war has revealed the fundamental duality of nuclear deterrence and changed in very dramatic ways the relationship between nuclear weapons possessors and the rest of the international community.

On the one hand, the conflict has emphasized how nuclear weapons remain central in preventing an all-out war between great powers. The decision of the Biden administration to provide weapons without being involved in the actual fighting has been justified numerous times to prevent an escalation into World War III. Yet, the Russian nuclear might has equally been unable to compel Ukraine to surrender nor to prevent further military aid from flowing into the country. And the nuclear threat that the Russian decision-makers have copiously and irresponsibly emanated from social media and T.V. has done nothing to curb the political support among Europeans and Americans to help Ukraine win the war.

On the other hand, a common narrative circulating today among Ukrainians and other non-nuclear weapons states argues that had Ukraine kept the Soviet nuclear weapons stationed on its territory, it would have never been attacked. This narrative is understandable

but based on some historical misconceptions. As my colleague Mariana Budjeryn stated in her extraordinary book, the nuclear weapons in the Ukrainian territories were not “for Ukraine to be given away.” They belonged to the Soviet Union, and Ukraine had little bargaining power to retain them. Neither the Russians nor the Americans – who negotiated with Ukraine the Budapest Memorandum – would have ever accepted for Ukraine to return nuclear weapons, given the lack of proper infrastructure and the developmental needs that the country was facing.

These two lessons learned and contrasting narratives will be important in the Asian context. It is fair to assume that China and the North Korean regime have analyzed the Ukraine war’s dynamics and drawn essential conclusions. First: nuclear weapons do very little to help countries conquer territory they want to retain. Should China decide to invade Taiwan, nuclear weapons will play a secondary role in a highly conventional operation. Second, strategic nuclear weapons are essential, yet tactical nuclear weapons might be a better insurance policy for a country concerned with its territorial sovereignty. The decision of North Korea to develop tactical nuclear weapons is driven precisely by this logic. For a country under attack, striking with strategic weapons one of the main cities of the adversary would only bring about complete escalation and further destruction. The ability to repel attacks with the use of tactical nuclear weapons instead might be a way to deter further conventional strikes while avoiding a full-scale escalation which – presumably – the country under attack wants to avoid.

3. China, India, and the Russian Federation “Friendship” into Greater Focus

The Ukraine war has also deepened the division between the US-led alliance systems and China and Russia and strengthened – to a certain extent – the Sino-Russian cooperation. It is fair to say that US-Russia relations will remain frozen for a significant period, and any prospect for future nuclear arms control agreements is bleak if non-existent. The expansion of NATO as a direct result of the Ukraine war will most likely force Russia to deploy nuclear

weapons along its northern border and possibly seek a nuclear sharing agreement with Belorussia to counter the NATO consolidation. Russia's loss of access to the European market will also increase its reliance and dependence on Asia, China, and India in particular. Russia can offer two critical resources that these two countries need: energy and weapons. More significant Russian investments in the nuclear energy sector of these countries are to be expected, as is a greater flow of high-tech military weapons and greater military cooperation in space, hypersonic, and other strategic domains.

While Asia is already poised to become the theater of most acute great power's competition, it is possible to assume that it will also become the region of destination of ever greater military investments. The US-based alliance system in Asia will be put under greater strain to match and compete with such investments and to manage a rapid arms race across multiple domains of competition.

4. The Ukraine War Has Encouraged Countries like Iran and North Korea to Continue and Expand Their Illicit Export of Military Technology

According to American intelligence sources, the Russian Federation is buying "millions of artillery shells and rockets from North Korea" after securing several drone shipments from Iran. The information disclosed by the American intelligence community confirmed concerns that the sanction regime against the regime of Pyongyang is crumbling, and the Russians will obstruct any future resolution against North Korea at the U.N. Security Council. This state of affairs is dangerous, and solutions are elusive. It is fair to expect that from now on, the Russian Federation, desperate to procure weapons to overcome the fierce resistance of Ukraine, will bolster its cooperation with North Korea by providing the regime of Kim Jong Un with several vital assets. For once, the Russians could help North Korea achieve the long-sought light water reactor North Korea has longed for. In addition, as energy insecurity grows in the country, the Russians could become the primary provider of oil and gas. The incentive

for the Russians would be to receive from North Korea illicit weapons and bolster North Korea's nuclear weapons program enough to keep the United States concerned.

5. What Should South Korea Do?

The strategic landscape, both regionally and globally, is deteriorating fast. South Korea will find itself at the convergence of multiple crises. At the global level, the United States will demand more from its allies in Europe and Asia to contain China. Demands will range from economic to social, political to military. For South Korea, it would be critical to identify early on what concessions the country is willing to make to satisfy American expectations and at what costs. Whereas at present, ROK has been superb in maintaining excellent relations with China and the United States, in the future, greater alignment to the U.S. agenda might be expected.

To reduce the political costs of more substantial American alignment, South Korea could play a leading role in international organizations, especially in the nuclear energy and high-tech sectors. South Korea's rise as a main global nuclear energy supplier provides the country with an excellent opportunity to be a more influential player in advancing new norms of nuclear nonproliferation, nuclear security, and counterproliferation. In addition, because of its thriving tech sector, stronger partnerships with U.N. humanitarian agencies could help the U.N. deliver more aid at lower costs and mitigate some of the dramatic effects of the Ukraine war.

However, at the regional level and within the Korean Peninsula, the role of ROK is the most important and urgent. It is clear by now that no incentives exist now for DPRK to halt its nuclear weapons program. What is indispensable at this point, however, is authentic leadership in managing nuclear risks and reducing possibilities of miscalculation and accidental escalation. ROK could choose, for instance, to cooperate with the U.S. and China to reinstate the six-party talks. It might not lead to significant concessions from the DPRK.

Still, it can be used as a mechanism for risk reduction in a time of greater uncertainty and dramatic security concerns.

Finally, South Korea could work with other non-nuclear weapons states to develop a new protection regime that could help all countries without nuclear weapons to receive negative security assurances from all nuclear weapons states. However symbolic, this gesture is essential in a time of abysmal mistrust and ethical anarchy. ■

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