

## Becoming an “Unfriendly” State

### *South Korea–Russia Relations and the Invasion of Ukraine*

#### ABSTRACT

When Russia invaded Ukraine, South Korea’s initial response was cautious. While criticizing Moscow’s actions, the Moon administration also indicated it would join any multilateral sanctions effort but would not impose its own unilateral sanctions as the United States, the European Union, and other Western democracies had done. After receiving internal and external criticism along with the likelihood of economic repercussions for not imposing its own sanctions, South Korea changed course and altered its hedging strategy toward a more robust response to Russian aggression. The war forced South Korea to reassess its relationship with Russia, and despite landing on Moscow’s list of “unfriendly” states, determined that its long-term interests were better served by altering its ties with Russia in favor of greater alignment with other liberal democracies.

**KEYWORDS:** South Korea, Russia, Ukraine, Vladimir Putin, sanctions

#### INTRODUCTION

On March 7, 2022, less than two weeks after beginning its invasion of Ukraine, Russia published a list of “foreign states and territories that commit unfriendly actions against Russia, its companies, and citizens,” including those that “imposed or joined the sanctions against Russia after the start of a special military operation of the Russian Armed Forces in Ukraine” (*TASS* 2022). Along with the United States, Canada, most of Europe, Japan,

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Australia, and others, the Republic of Korea (ROK) was one of these “unfriendly” states.

The transition of ROK–Russia relations from what, less than two decades earlier, was a “strategic cooperative partnership” to one where South Korea was called out as “unfriendly” was rapid and stark. Since the end of the Cold War, South Korea had sought to build a relationship with this once bitter enemy and devoted considerable effort to expanding political and economic ties with Russia. South Korea saw important opportunities for its growing economy in expanded trade and investment, while Russia saw the relationship as a potential lifeline in the struggles of its economic transition from communism and for bringing development to the Russian Far East (Heo and Roehrig 2014, 67–77).

From this beginning, the relationship grew. In September 1990 South Korea and Russia established formal diplomatic relations, and by 2008, they elevated the relationship to a “strategic cooperative partnership.” Four years later, Russia was South Korea’s 11th-largest trade partner, and *chaebol* such as Hyundai, Samsung, Daewoo, Lotte, and LG, among others, had established a strong presence in Russia.

South Korea also saw closer Russian ties as a possible asset in dealing with North Korea, especially trying to convince Pyongyang to set aside its nuclear weapons ambitions. Throughout the Cold War, Russia was North Korea’s chief economic and political benefactor, a position that might provide leverage to moderate Pyongyang’s goals and actions. When Moscow became part of the six-party process, its potential as an important influence was even more valuable to Seoul.

Despite optimism for the potential of this relationship, it did not reach the heights many in the two countries had hoped for. Trade and investment increased over the years, but not to the level many had expected. Moreover, Russian help in dealing with North Korea was largely disappointing. Yet hope remained. In 2014, South Korean leaders believed there was still potential for ROK–Russian relations, and following Moscow’s annexation of Crimea they were reluctant to join international efforts to punish Russia with economic sanctions. The Park Geun-hye administration chose to keep its head down and protect its economic and political interests, despite US pressure to join the call for economic sanctions.

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022 resurrected many of these issues and entailed some difficult decisions for South Korea in Moon Jae-in’s closing

months in office. Similar to the Park administration, Moon opted for a cautious response that criticized Russia's actions but also sought to protect ROK economic interests and preserve the possibility of Moscow's assistance with North Korea. Ukraine was a distant conflict, and ROK interests were not obvious; South Korea needed to be careful. Yet, almost immediately, the Moon administration's cautious approach was challenged from both within South Korea and outside the country, pressing the government to reassess its decision and join the push, led by the US and the EU, for economic sanctions to punish Russia for its actions.

After initially continuing the cautious approach of the previous administration, Moon changed direction and began a process that led to a rapid deterioration of South Korea's ties with Russia. This article addresses several questions: How did the Russian invasion of Ukraine affect ROK–Russia relations? What factors contributed to Moon's initial decision and subsequent policy shift? And what is the likely long-term impact of the war on ROK–Russian relations?

The Moon administration's initial policy direction was a continuation of past ROK policy, which viewed good ties with Russia as important for ROK economic interests and an asset in dealing with North Korea. The conflict was cast as a regional issue presenting few reasons for direct ROK involvement. This approach had been taken by previous administrations, both conservative and progressive, and Moon was reluctant to veer widely from their course. Moreover, Moon had already shown that inter-Korean relations were an important focus of his administration and that a good relationship with Moscow was a factor that had to be kept in play, even if there had been little help in the past. Moon also hoped to avoid a major policy decision during the closing weeks of the presidential election, and there were likely some institutional restrictions at work as well. Similar to the approach in 2014, South Korean leaders believed they could protect ROK economic interests, maintain ties with Moscow, and manage the pressure coming from Washington and others by adopting a cautious hedging strategy.

But in a matter of days after receiving extensive criticism, the Blue House recalibrated its policy based on several factors. While joining more fully in economic sanctions would have economic and political repercussions for ROK–Russia relations, there were also economic costs for South Korean restraint. In addition, Seoul risked reputational damage for not fully joining other liberal democracies in a strong, united stand to uphold state

sovereignty, international law, and democratic values against Russian aggression. The Russian invasion was far more horrendous than the 2014 annexation of Crimea and needed to be considered in a different light. Indeed, strong ROK public support for Ukraine, particularly among the youth, along with domestic criticism of the government's actions, indicated that government policy was out of step with prevailing sentiment in the country. There were also potential security costs. What impact would not being fully aligned with the United States and other Western democracies have on possible North Korean actions? The message to Pyongyang of the unified opposition it might face in challenging South Korean sovereignty was another important consideration. Finally, the war brought into sharper focus that Russian interest in helping with North Korea had evaporated and there was little to gain in this regard by maintaining strong bonds with the Kremlin.

Though the ROK reflex response was caution and hedging, following the same playbook used in the past was going to be difficult. While there has been a cost to some sectors of the South Korean economy, overall, these costs have been outweighed by benefits in other areas. Moreover, the assessment of the potential worth of economic and political ties with Russia changed—they were not as valuable as once thought. South Korea would have been hard-pressed to maintain the status quo with the Kremlin as the tragedy of the conflict played out. In the end, South Korea decided to ramp up its support for Ukraine, though it retained limits to military assistance due to the complex security environment on the Peninsula.

This article begins with an examination of the South Korean response to Russia's annexation of Crimea as an important precursor to the invasion of Ukraine. It continues with the Moon administration's initial cautious response and then its pivot to align with the actions of the United States, Europe, and others. It concludes with an assessment of South Korea's actions, along with the future of ROK–Russia relations.

## THE RUSSIAN ANNEXATION OF CRIMEA

Growing its ties with Moscow was an ongoing ROK project from the end of the Cold War, but in 2014 these efforts were tested when Russia annexed Crimea. In February, Russian president Vladimir Putin ordered Russian troops into the region, and after a dubious referendum on March 16, the Republic of Crimea declared its independence from Ukraine. Two days later,

Russia formally annexed the region (Kuchins 2015). Many countries joined the United States and the EU in condemning the Russian actions and refused to recognize its acquisition of Crimea. Washington also led the effort to impose economic sanctions to penalize Moscow.

These events placed South Korea in a difficult position. ROK leaders had devoted a great deal of effort to growing their political and economic ties with Russia. A few months before the referendum, President Park had launched the Eurasia Initiative, a far-reaching plan to establish energy, communication, and economic networks to link Russia, China, the two Koreas, and Central Asia (Snyder 2018, 180). In the wake of Crimea, Seoul faced considerable pressure to curtail these measures and join the US/EU coalition.

Overall, South Korea's response under Park was guarded: willing to join in condemning Russian actions but reluctant to participate in tangible measures to chasten Moscow. As a rotating member of the UN Security Council at the time, South Korea supported a draft resolution (prior to the March 16 referendum) that reaffirmed Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity while proclaiming that the Crimean referendum on leaving Ukraine and joining Russia had no validity. The expected Russian veto killed the resolution, but a week later the UN General Assembly passed its own version, with South Korea among the 100 countries that voted in favor. In addition, the Park administration released a statement reading: "The government of the Republic of Korea . . . expressed serious concern over the latest developments in Ukraine. Ukraine's sovereignty, territorial integrity and independence must be respected. The ROK government will not recognize Crimea's referendum and Russia's annexation of Crimea" (MOFA 2014).

But although South Korea joined these diplomatic efforts, it did not participate in other measures to punish Moscow. Regarding sanctions, Seoul indicated it would "comply" with the sanctions imposed by the United States and others, but would not implement any unilateral sanctions. South Korea also refrained from canceling a newly agreed visa waiver program with Russia, a signal of their growing ties. South Korea was the only US ally that did not end this program (Tertitskiy 2021).

As condemnation of Russia's annexation increased, ROK leaders and analysts feared the country would be drawn more deeply into the conflict and be pressed by Washington for a more forceful response that would be detrimental to ROK interests. In the months that followed, Park walked a cautious line that sought to maintain a working relationship with Russia

while carefully avoiding international criticism, particularly from the United States. Park met with Putin during the November 2014 meeting of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum in Beijing, and again the following year during the UN Conference of the Parties on climate change (Harris and Lee 2022). She also attended Russia's annual Eastern Economic Forum in September 2016 in Vladivostok, a Russian effort to draw in foreign investment for its Far East region. However, soon after that, Park was engulfed in the corruption scandal that led to her impeachment in December 2016 and removal from office the following March.

The Park administration was willing to call out Russia for its actions in Crimea but retained its confidence in the potential that good ties with Moscow had for the ROK economy and for assisting with North Korea. Increased involvement in the punitive measures pushed by Washington could draw South Korea deeper into the conflict and cause further damage to ROK–Russia relations (Song 2014). The level of violence remained relatively low, and most in South Korea viewed Crimea as a regional affair with little direct impact on the country, so there was broad public support for the government's restrained response. Thus, there was little reason for Park to change course.

Park's successor, Moon Jae-in, continued to pursue close ties with Russia, and in a September 2017 speech at that year's Eastern Economic Forum announced his administration's New Northern Policy, designed to increase economic and political cooperation among the economies of Russia, China, Central Asia, Eastern Europe, and the two Koreas through improved cooperation, infrastructure development, and investment. The core of the New Northern Policy was the Nine-Bridge Strategy, which focused on key sectors including natural gas, rail transportation, seaports, and electricity (Kapoor 2020). Two projects became particularly important: connecting both Koreas and the Trans-Korean rail network to the Trans-Siberian railroad; and building a natural gas pipeline from Russia through the North to connect with South Korea.

The result of these efforts to expand and deepen ROK–Russian ties has been mixed. Today, Russia is South Korea's 12th-largest trade partner but accounts for only 2.2% of total ROK trade (Haggard 2022). Over the past two decades, trade levels have grown, albeit with downturns interspersed among the growth years. In 2000, trade was a modest USD 2.9 billion but reached a 20-year high of USD 27 billion in 2021 (Korea Customs Service 2022). The

trade balance is typically at a deficit for South Korea, with Russia buying ROK manufactured goods such as electronics, semiconductors, appliances, ships, automobiles, and machinery. In turn, South Korean imports consist largely of raw materials and commodities, including oil, gas, coal, precious metals, fish, and gems.

Energy is a particularly important sector since South Korea is almost entirely dependent on imports for its energy needs. In 2021, 73% of South Korea's imports from Russia consisted of fossil fuels (Haggard 2022). Russia was South Korea's fourth-largest source of fossil fuels, but this accounted for only 9% of South Korea's total energy imports. Crude oil and natural gas have relatively modest shares of fossil fuel imports, at 6% and 5% respectively, but others claim a larger share (Stangarone 2022). In 2021, Russia supplied 41% of South Korea's imported anthracite coal, 23% of naphtha, and 16% of bituminous coal (Haggard 2022). However, these numbers are low compared to Europe's dependency on Russian energy.

South Korean investment in the Russian economy has also been modest. Some ROK firms have production facilities in Russia, particularly automobile manufacturers Hyundai and Kia, and close to 40 ROK firms have operations in Russia, but in general it is not a major destination for ROK investment. Firms were hesitant to expand their economic operations after the imposition of sanctions over Crimea, and overall, investment since 2010 has been stagnant (Zakharova 2019). Russian efforts to draw in ROK capital for the Far East have been even more disappointing. Some of the plans to build rail and road links along with energy pipelines require North Korean cooperation that has not been forthcoming (Lee 2013). In addition, investment in the Russian Far East has been hampered by poor infrastructure, a floundering Russian economy, the region's small market potential, and high production costs (Kapoor 2020).

South Korea's restrained response was also connected to the North Korea problem. Since Russia became part of the six-party process in 2003, South Korea has sought its help in denuclearizing the North. If ROK–Russia ties are hostile, Moscow has little incentive to push Pyongyang to denuclearize or to hold back its political and economic support for North Korea, including any willingness to enforce UN sanctions resulting from Pyongyang's nuclear weapon and ballistic missile programs. Throughout the denuclearization process, Russia has held an important position as a former North Korean ally, six-party talks participant, and permanent UN Security Council

member wielding a veto. Indeed, should South Korea scrap its ties with Russia, the Kremlin’s relationship with North Korea will have more space to grow. As a result, Moscow will be unlikely to help the denuclearization process and may actually obstruct any progress. Even more troubling, Russia may give North Korea military assistance that could destabilize Peninsula security.

Despite all the effort, ROK–Russian relations remained modest, with Artyom Lukin, a Russian scholar of Korea, noting in 2018 that ROK–Russian relations are “neither very close nor deep.” Thus the overall economic stakes have been relatively low, though with a greater impact in some sectors. In many respects, the economic interests were more about potential, particularly if North Korea could be convinced to cooperate in some of the economic projects that were on the table. After the summits of 2018 and 2019, many were optimistic regarding regional relations, and the Moon administration believed there was an opening to reduce sanctions on North Korea in hopes of implementing the economic plans with Russia to further improve inter-Korean relations. Yet as the months passed following the February 2019 summit in Hanoi, these possibilities faded. ROK–Russian relations remained stable but would soon be tested again. In a prescient assessment, Russian analyst Fyodor Tertitskiy (2021) commented in July:

The only scenario in which a deterioration of Russia–South Korea relations seems at all likely is an escalation of the standoff between Moscow and Washington to a state in which the fight against the Kremlin becomes the number one priority for the White House. In that case, Seoul really would be forced to show solidarity with Washington, and the Russia–South Korea friendship would become a thing of the past.

It was not long before Tertitskiy’s scenario came to pass.

#### **SOUTH KOREA’S RESPONSE TO THE RUSSIAN INVASION OF UKRAINE**

In spring 2021, Russia began a military buildup around Ukraine, escalating the conflict in the Donbas region that had been raging since the seizure of Crimea. Another Russian troop buildup followed in October as tension reached new levels. Russian officials denied any intention to invade, but on February 21, 2022, Moscow recognized the independence of the People’s



Republics of Luhansk and Donetsk, respectively, and moved troops into these two regions. Putin said that these measures were intended to maintain peace and protect Russian security interests, but they were clear violations of Ukrainian sovereignty and international law. Three days later, on February 24, Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine on multiple fronts in the east, north, and south.

The United States and its Western allies roundly condemned the Russian invasion and imposed a series of economic and financial sanctions that included trade restrictions, limits on the access of Russian banks to the SWIFT financial system, and the seizure of Russian assets abroad, including those of wealthy Russian oligarchs. Soon after, many of these sanctions were extended to Belarus, a Russian ally and supporter of the invasion. Governments also announced a variety of aid packages for Ukraine that included military aid, both lethal and non-lethal, along with humanitarian assistance. Many states (mostly NATO members, along with Australia and Japan) lined up to join the sanctions effort and contribute assistance to Ukraine. While much of Africa, Latin America, the Mideast, and Asia condemned the Russian actions, they did not join the other measures.

In the opening days of the conflict, South Korea faced some difficult decisions in crafting its response to the crisis. As a liberal democracy and a proponent of international law, the ROK government had important reasons to join the Western response in condemning the Russian actions and imposing economic costs. Also, over a dozen South Korean firms have operations in Ukraine, while others rely on Ukrainian suppliers for key items in the manufacture of semiconductors, and some, such as POSCO, have investments in Ukraine. On the other hand, South Korea also had important economic interests at stake in its relationship with Russia.

The Moon administration's initial response was cautious. At the start, President Moon declared: "As a responsible member of the international community, the Republic of Korea expresses support for international efforts, including economic sanctions, aimed at curbing armed invasion and resolving the situation peacefully, and will take part in them" (quoted in Kim Deok-hyun 2022). Soon after, at a National Security Council meeting, national security advisor Suh Hoon "expressed strong regret over Russia's invasion of Ukraine," calling for the crisis to "be peacefully resolved through diplomacy" and for Russia to "immediately stop invading Ukraine" (quoted in Kim Deok-hyun 2022). The Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) had

stated before the invasion began that “the government has no other option but to join sanctions against Russia, including export controls” (quoted in Kim Deok-hyun 2022). The next day, presidential spokesperson Park Seo-hyun said in an interview, “What we are saying is that we will naturally abide by the sanctions as they are issued by the US and European nations”—and then added, “We also have to keep in mind that our trade relations with Russia are growing” (quoted in Eunice Kim 2022).

While these pronouncements indicated South Korea’s willingness to join the international sanctions effort, the references to Russian trade hinted at the caution and nuance in its response. Though the Moon administration would join multilateral sanctions efforts, such as those enacted by an international body such as the United Nations, it would not impose unilateral sanctions of its own accord. A foreign ministry spokesperson clarified later that day that “of course some countries are considering unilateral sanctions including financial measures but we are not considering that” (quoted in Smith and Shin 2022). The next day, the senior secretary for public communication for the Moon administration elaborated in a radio interview: “It’s not an era where we can do something independently. It means that if the US and European countries impose sanctions on Russia, we will naturally join them because we are connected” (quoted in *Yonhap News* 2022a). In part, this may have been an indication that the sanctions regime was largely crafted and coordinated by the G7 and the EU, groups in which South Korea was not a member, leaving the door open for Seoul to eventually follow. In addition, it is not clear whether South Korea had the legal framework in place to move on such a wide-ranging set of export controls and economic sanctions in a relatively short time frame.

The first weeks of the war also coincided with the last two weeks of the presidential election in South Korea, and the issue popped up during a presidential debate in a heated exchange between Democratic Party candidate Lee Jae-myung and People Power Party candidate Yoon Suk-yeol. In response to a question, Lee criticized Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskyy as a way of highlighting Yoon’s own lack of foreign policy work: “A novice politician with only six months of experience became president of Ukraine. He said he wanted NATO membership and provoked Russia. That’s why the conflict ultimately happened” (Nam 2022). Other Democratic Party officials chimed in later with similar statements, linking the war to Zelenskyy’s naiveté as a jab at Yoon’s inexperience in foreign affairs and security. The implication was

that electing Yoon would bring similar poor judgement to the ROK presidency.

Yoon lambasted the opposition's statements on social media, expressed support for Ukraine, and offered an apology to Zelenskyy, while arguing that a strong alliance with the United States was the best way to prevent war on the Korean Peninsula. For many, however, Yoon's response seemed to be more about scoring political points, and he too was criticized on social media for mishandling his comments. Later, Yoon and Lee met with the Ukrainian ambassador to South Korea, Dmytro Ponomarenko, to make amends, but the damage had been done (Goh 2022).

Criticism of the Moon government's response came quickly from several quarters. A few days after the invasion, demonstrators in Seoul, Gwangju, and elsewhere condemned Russia, proclaimed strong support for the Ukrainian people, and called for a peaceful end to the conflict. Close to 400 civic groups organized a demonstration in front of the Russian embassy in Seoul, calling for the withdrawal of Russian forces. ROK citizens also responded with their wallets, donating over USD 3 million to a fund set up by the Ukrainian embassy to furnish medicine and food to the Ukrainian people (Kim Na-young 2022). Social media platforms were rife with strong declarations of support for Ukraine and condemnation of Russian actions. In addition, several petitions were submitted to the Blue House, with one calling for "direct and independent sanctions on Russia" (Na and Chung 2022). In short, the outpouring of public support for Ukraine showed that the government's response was not aligned with public sentiment.

Conservatives were also quick to pile on with criticism of Moon administration policy. For example, the editors at the conservative *Chosun Ilbo* (2022) called out the administration for its lukewarm response on sanctions, noting that "South Korea was the only U.S. ally that dragged its heels in announcing sanctions against Russia," and urged the government to be more aligned with the alliance. Thus, some analysts argued that being on the same page as Washington was an important consideration for ROK policy.

Finally, criticism also came from voices in the United States. For example, after the ROK government announcement on February 24, Victor Cha, Georgetown University professor and former National Security Council director of Asian Affairs in the George W. Bush White House, tweeted, "Not good enough. Moon should condemn Putin by name, enact tough bilateral sanctions (not just watered down multilateral), & defend democracy against

#russianinvasion Guard the liberal intl order. No hedging to preserve energy/NK equities, etc. No buckpassing the threat” (Cha 2022). Later, Evans Revere, a former US deputy assistant secretary of state for East Asian and Pacific affairs, called South Korea “out of step. Not only out of step with the United States, but out of step with the international community, undermining the perception of international solidarity among democratic and allied countries” (quoted in Oh 2022).

On the same day that South Korea announced its decision to comply with international sanctions but not impose unilateral measures, the Moon administration learned of the impact of this cautious response. That day, the US Commerce Department issued a Foreign Direct Product Rule (FDPR) to support sanctions on Russia (Federal Register 2022). The rule required allies that export items to Russia that use US-origin sensitive and advanced technology to obtain a license from the United States. The list included 57 technologies in several different areas, including computer chips, microprocessors, computer circuits, and information technology. As with a similar rule used against the Chinese company Huawei in 2019, the United States intended to limit Russian access to important US technologies. However, countries that “committed to implementing substantially similar export controls as part of their domestic sanctions against Russia [would be] . . . excluded from the requirements” (Federal Register 2022). Along with the rule, Washington released a list of 32 exempted countries—27 in the EU plus Australia, Canada, Japan, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom. South Korea was not on the list.

The Moon government was shocked at its absence from the exemption list, along with the criticism it received for its position on sanctions. Over the next few days, ROK officials convened planning meetings and sessions with representatives of ROK corporations affected by the FDPR to assess the damage and prepare for meetings with Commerce Department officials to request exemption (*Yonhap News* 2022b). On February 28, the Moon government announced a policy shift and its intent to impose unilateral sanctions. Specifically, Seoul revealed that it would stop financial transactions with seven Russian banks and their branches to remove them from the SWIFT network, ban the export of strategic items on the Commerce Department’s list, and recommend that financial institutions stop investing in Russian government bonds (Oh and Byun 2022). In announcing the shift, MOFA (2022a) maintained that it “strongly condemned Russia’s armed

invasion against Ukraine. As a responsible member of the international community, the Korean government decided to actively participate in the international community's efforts, including economic sanctions, for a peaceful resolution of the situation." A few days later, South Korea followed up by banning exports to other Russian firms and the Russian Ministry of Defense, and extending the sanctions to Belarus.

After this change in policy, representatives of the ROK Trade Ministry and the US Commerce Department met for talks to address the sanctions issue, and on March 4 South Korea announced that it would be included on the exemption list. A few days later, in the joint statement that formally revealed the result, ROK trade minister Yeo Han-koo declared: "Korea is closely aligned with the US and the global coalition to put export control measures and economic sanctions against Russia's military aggression. We welcome Korea's addition to the list of foreign direct product (FDP) rules exclusion countries for Russia/Belarus and are strongly committed to implementing swift and effective export control measures in partnership with our private sector" (US Department of Commerce 2022). The statement also included US praise for South Korea's actions.

The Russian response to South Korea's policy shift was quick: relations between them would change. Andrey Kulik, Russian ambassador to South Korea, declared, "The decision is deeply regrettable. Russia-South Korea relations have developed only in a positive way in the past 30 years. The upward trajectory, I think, will now change course. Cooperative projects among South and North Korea, and Russia are indeed closely related to resolving the nuclear issue, inter-Korean relations, peace on the Korean Peninsula, security and prosperity. With that in mind, it makes me doubt if South Korea really needs all that" (quoted in Choi 2022a).

The shift in sanctions policy was also accompanied by other measures. On March 2, the UN General Assembly voted to condemn the Russian actions and called for an end to hostilities and the withdrawal of Russian troops. South Korea joined 140 other countries to approve the resolution. The next day, Moon had a telephone call with Zelenskyy, during which he offered his condolences for those who had died in the conflict and expressed his respect for the courage of the Ukrainian people and for President Zelenskyy's leadership. Shortly after the call, Moon retweeted a Zelenskyy post and added, "We stand in solidarity with the people of Ukraine who have risen resolutely to defend their country" (quoted in *Yonhap News* 2022d).

Yoon had also met with the Ukrainian ambassador on March 2 and told him: "It is very natural for many free countries, including South Korea, to condemn and participate in sanctions against Russia's invasion, which is clearly a violation of international law" (quoted in *Korea Herald* 2022). Yoon continued this support for Ukraine after his presidential win and on into his administration. In May 2022, at the APEC forum, South Korea joined the United States, Japan, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand in a statement that again condemned the Russian invasion. In the end, after an initially cautious approach, South Korea joined the United States, Europe, and other liberal democracies to send a strong message to Russia on the invasion.

### DIRECT AID TO UKRAINE

At the outset of the war, some states pledged direct material support to Ukraine in addition to imposing sanctions to punish Russia. The aid included offers of humanitarian assistance to address the suffering of the Ukrainian people, support to states that were accepting Ukrainian refugees, and military aid, both lethal and non-lethal, for Ukrainian self-defense. In subsequent months, a long list of states contributed many different types of assistance (Antezza et al. 2022).

South Korea's response to the calls for direct support to Ukraine was again careful and measured, with large amounts of humanitarian aid but limits to military assistance, based on security considerations. In addition to the USD 3 million in private donations, the Moon administration was quick to offer government assistance. On February 28, the MOFA announced a package of USD 10 million in humanitarian aid, noting, "We hope our government's support effectively helps the Ukrainian people and refugees, and we will continue active contributions to resolve the humanitarian crisis in Ukraine" (quoted in *Yonhap News* 2022c). In April, foreign minister Chung Eui-yong revealed another contribution of USD 30 million during his attendance at the NATO foreign ministers meeting, where he was attending as a guest, and pledged to provide more if needed. This aid included direct humanitarian assistance to Ukraine, along with help for several international organizations. It included medical equipment such as defibrillators, bioprotection suits, blankets, ventilators, emergency medicine, and first aid kits (MOFA 2022b). South Korea also contributed USD 4.5 million to the UN World Food Programme to provide food and cash assistance to Ukrainian refugees.

Another contribution was made to the Ukraine response plan in Moldova, with an initial donation of USD 1.5 million in March and another USD 3 million in June (UN World Food Programme 2022). South Korea contributed to refugee assistance programs in Poland, Romania, Hungary, and Slovakia, and in June approved another USD 50 million in humanitarian aid, putting the total contribution as of the end of June 2022 at USD 100 million (MOFA 2022c).

South Korea's assistance also included military aid, but the Moon administration was clear that it would be limited to non-lethal assistance. As a result, South Korea has sent Ukraine over 65 different items, including helmets, bulletproof vests, medical kits, and combat rations, together worth USD 2.37 million.

But South Korea, being the sixth-largest global arms exporter, was also urged to provide direct military assistance to the Ukrainian war effort. The press reported that US officials requested South Korean military help (Kuhn 2022), and in his address to the National Assembly Zelenskyy made a specific request for armored vehicles and anti-ship and anti-tank weapons, along with anti-aircraft systems, especially the KM surface-to-air missile. Zelenskyy framed his request by recalling that South Korea received international assistance during the Korean War (Smith and Choi 2022). Attendance at Zelenskyy's address was sparse: only 60 of the 300 legislators were present, and some of these left during the presentation. He did not receive a standing ovation at the conclusion of his remarks, which had been typical at other forums. Two weeks later, the Ukrainian Ministry of Foreign Affairs posted a video to its Twitter account listing 31 countries as "partners," with the head of its armed forces, general Valerii Zaluzhnyi, offering his thanks for their "assistance and unwavering support in these hard times" (Ko 2022). But South Korea and Japan were not on the list, likely because they did not provide lethal military aid. It is also possible that Kyiv sought to reduce the chances of Russian retaliation against Japan and South Korea, as both countries were already on Russia's "unfriendly" list. For some in South Korea, the omission showed a lack of gratitude, but others believed it was meant to reduce the chances of complicating ROK–Russian relations (Ko 2022).

South Korea's position on these requests has remained consistent: the military aid would remain non-lethal. In fact, before Zelenskyy's plea, Defense Minister Suh had declined Ukraine's request for lethal military equipment and told Zelenskyy that this matter had to be determined by its

impact on South Korea's security situation, along with any effect it might have on readiness. South Korea's reluctance is grounded in two concerns. First, while the war in Ukraine rages, South Korea continues to face a dangerous and complex security environment in its own neighborhood, with pressing defense needs. For some weapon systems Ukraine requested, for example the KM surface-to-air missile, South Korea lacks a sufficiently large reserve inventory and to fulfill Ukraine's request would have to remove front-line missiles, jeopardizing its own readiness and security (Kuhn 2022).

The other concern is the impact lethal aid would have on ROK–Russia ties. Relations have already declined precipitously, but providing direct military aid might provoke a more serious backlash that directly threatens Korean Peninsula security. For example, Russia might transfer technology or weapons systems to North Korea that could disrupt the military balance in Korea (Kuhn 2022).

When Yoon became president, he expressed interest in re-examining the question of lethal aid and possibly expanding the range of South Korean military contributions. In May, at the second meeting of the Ukraine Defense Consultative Group, a US-led gathering of more than 40 countries to coordinate aid deliveries, vice defense minister Shin Beom-chul pledged that South Korea would “explore ways to make additional contributions in light of our responsibility and role in the international community as a global pivotal country” (quoted in Ji 2022a). The following day, a Ministry of National Defense spokesperson clarified that while South Korea is always ready to cooperate, “our stance is that the provision of lethal weapons to Ukraine requires careful consideration” (quoted in Ji 2022a). In the end, the Yoon administration has maintained the restriction on direct lethal aid to Ukraine.

While direct lethal assistance remains off the table, South Korea has been asked to contribute to the war effort more indirectly. As a ROK military official remarked in May, “We’re weighing an approach where we would provide exports to countries that request South Korea’s assistance because the arms and ammunition they have provided to Ukraine have left them with inadequate reserves at home” (quoted in Kwon 2022). Poland has been a front-line state in the conflict and has given significant military assistance to the Ukrainian fighters, including combat aircraft, tanks, multiple rocket-launcher systems, air-to-ground missiles, and self-propelled howitzers. To replace these items, Poland contacted the ROK government about



purchasing several types of Korean weapon systems (Ji 2022b). In July the two governments announced an agreement estimated at USD 15–20 billion, the largest arms deal in South Korea’s history, for the sale of K2 tanks and K9 howitzers, followed in September by another for FA-50 fighter jets, worth USD 3 billion. Delivery will happen in phases, and some later rounds of production will occur in Poland.

Canada, too, has approached South Korea, to purchase artillery rounds. Part of Canada’s support to Ukraine included M777 howitzers and the 155 mm shells they fire. South Korea uses and produces the same ammunition for its K9 howitzer, and Ottawa has asked to purchase 100,000 rounds, which would likely be sold to them at below market prices (Choi 2022b). As of this writing, the Yoon administration is still considering the request.

Russia’s perception of these actions is uncertain. While there is some fear that Moscow might retaliate, others in the ROK government think otherwise: “So far, there have been no retaliatory actions against countries that have sent military equipment to Ukraine even though Russia has strongly condemned them. Due to possible fallout, including exits of multinational companies operating there, the Russian government also seems to remain very cautious before taking any action.” That is, given the third-party nature of the sales, Russia may hesitate to respond for fear of further damage to its economy (Kang 2022). While Seoul has sought to downplay the links these sales have to Ukraine, it is clear that they provide a path to contribute to Ukrainian defense in a less direct manner. They will also give a boost to South Korea’s arms industry and overall economy while deepening its ties with NATO countries, which could lead to further economic and political cooperation with the alliance and other member states. These sales also demonstrate to Washington and the world South Korea’s support for confronting Russian aggression, without directly killing Russian soldiers and further antagonizing the Kremlin. This is another effort by South Korea to walk a careful line that balances competing interests, though it is unclear whether Russia will see the difference. Still, the balance sheet is likely to show that while South Korea may be altering its relationship with Russia, this change will be offset by gains elsewhere.

#### **MAKING A CHOICE: ASSESSING THE SOUTH KOREAN RESPONSE**

In many respects, the invasion of Ukraine forced South Korea to choose between two strategies with different factors and interests in play. The first

approach was to continue the cautious hedging strategy begun in 2014, when Russia annexed Crimea, and Seoul protected its economic interests and the potential for greater cooperation, maintaining the hope that Russia would help manage the North Korea nuclear problem. This strategy spanned two administrations, those of conservative Park Geun-hye and progressive Moon Jae-in, and treated the Russian invasion as a regional concern with low stakes for South Korean interests. The second strategy entailed joining the United States, the EU, Australia, Japan, and others in more directly and forcefully confronting the Russian efforts to undermine state sovereignty, international law and norms, and democratic values, while recognizing that Moscow was unlikely to help much in dealing with the North. Though Seoul's initial response to the Russian invasion was cautious, in the end it joined the more vigorous efforts to oppose Russian aggression, despite the impact of this move on relations with the Kremlin.

At the outset, the Moon administration opted to protect its existing economic interests with Russia as well as the potential for future growth. For some in South Korea, the country's interests in Ukraine were not self-evident, and there was no need to sacrifice its economic interests with respect to Russia just to show solidarity with the United States. The Obama administration had applied this kind of pressure in 2014, and Park Geun-hye had resisted it. Maintaining access to Russian raw materials and markets, along with the potential for future growth, were important interests that would be lost by joining the more robust sanctions effort, with little for South Korea to gain.

These economic interests were also tied to the Moon administration's focus on improving inter-Korean relations, the central foreign policy goal throughout his time in office. It was thought that good relations with Russia increased the chance that Moscow would help in moderating North Korea's behavior and be a positive force for dealing with Pyongyang. Economic cooperation, particularly linking the Trans-Siberian and Trans-Korea rail networks and building gas pipelines that connected Russia and the two Koreas, were paths Moon believed could lead to improved North-South relations and peace on the Peninsula. On the other hand, alienating Russia might prompt Putin to increase military support to North Korea, including not only more advanced conventional weapons but also technology assistance for Pyongyang's nuclear and missile programs (O'Carroll 2022). More broadly, Russia, might also decide to build a closer relationship with North

Korea, a possibility heightened by Kim Jong-un's strong support for the Russian invasion (Lee and Bischke 2022). Thus, given how important the improvement of inter-Korean relations was to the Moon administration, jettisoning good ties with Russia was a difficult choice to make.

Other considerations also likely played a role in Moon's calculations. Voices from the ROK business community, particularly firms such as Hyundai, Samsung, and LG, which stood to lose with the imposition of robust sanctions, probably put pressure on the administration to avoid this option. When the US FDPR became public, the economic cost of not receiving an exemption shifted the calculations. Thus, leaders may have underestimated the cost of maintaining a cautious policy. In 2014, the Park administration took a similar approach after the annexation of Crimea, viewing these matters as having little impact on South Korea and receiving little criticism for its restrained response. In fact, ROK public opinion was largely supportive of this approach, so there was no domestic pushback. Moon may have mistakenly believed that the Russian invasion would be seen domestically in a similar manner and been surprised by the condemnation the decision received, not only from abroad but also from within South Korea—especially among the younger generations, who demonstrated, donated money, and showed strong support for Ukraine's cause. Indeed, many in Moon's Democratic Party believed that Ukraine was not South Korea's concern and wondered why South Korea should jeopardize its interests for something less important. However, domestic pressure, along with criticism from the United States and Europe, pushed the administration to reassess its policy.

Lastly, the invasion occurred during the closing days of the ROK presidential election, and while Ukraine was not a major election issue, it may have had some impact. It is likely that Moon did not want to make such a major shift so close to the election and saddle a new administration with a significant change in ROK policy. There also may have been concerns for any negative effect a strong response might have on the election chances of Lee, the Democratic Party candidate. Thus, maintaining the status quo was likely viewed as the safer option. However, Lee's comments during the debate, the subsequent blowback, and other statements by Democratic Party officials also reflected back on the Moon administration. Consequently, voter perceptions of these statements may have influenced his decision to adopt a tougher line. Moreover, though Yoon received criticism for how he handled his response after the debate, his stronger initial support for Ukraine may

have resonated with some voters, though most would have made up their mind by this time in the campaign. Thus, after the debate and the outpouring of domestic support for Ukraine, the political calculus may have changed, though it is not clear how much impact this had on the election results.

On the other side of the ledger, South Korean leaders eventually recognized important interests that would be jeopardized if the government chose not to become more deeply involved in opposing the invasion, despite the impact it might have on relations with Moscow. The Russian aggression is a violation of international law and the norms for state sovereignty, with subsequent Russian conduct of the war descending to the level of war crimes, which has upset global peace and stability (Varaki 2022). These actions go against South Korea’s values and interests as a liberal democracy; indeed, in an early statement criticizing Russian actions, President Moon declared that the “use of armed force that causes losses of innocent lives cannot be justified under any circumstances” (quoted in Lee and Lee 2022). South Korea needed to join the broader global effort to confront these actions, not only as a statement against Russian aggression but also to demonstrate the unity of action that could follow to deter others from pursuing this path in the future. Moreover, a forthright position in this regard goes beyond moral and legal considerations: the disruption of the global economy, particularly with respect to oil markets, grain prices, and supply chains, has been the war’s most direct and significant economic impact on South Korea. A strong, unified response that includes South Korea helps ensure that any other state contemplating such an action will think hard before proceeding and again upsetting global economic flows.

President Yoon took office with a goal of elevating South Korea’s role in world affairs to that of a “global pivotal state.” Though the Yoon administration continues to define the scope of this objective, sitting on the sidelines would have raised serious questions about the administration’s willingness to establish South Korea as a more active participant in global affairs beyond the Peninsula. As Seoul-based journalist Sooyoung Oh (2022) phrased it, “With its GDP now among the world’s 10 largest, and its military power in the top six, South Korea’s place in the world is no longer shrimp-sized. Seoul’s actions should reflect this. It’s no longer a question of choice of whose side to take—it’s a matter of facing up to responsibility.” Thus, maintaining its cautious response could have had lasting reputational costs for South Korea, marking it as a “free rider” and less interested in contributing to a stable

international order that is in South Korea's interest, even if the Ukrainian conflict is far away.

As noted earlier, security concerns, particularly the hope that Russia would be an important player with North Korea, are often cited as reasons for South Korea's caution. However, an argument can also be made that failing to provide a robust response had negative security implications. The war shattered whatever hope remained for Russian help and greatly reduced any perceived benefits of maintaining these ties for the sake of North Korean denuclearization. However, while the possibilities of Russian assistance have evaporated, Seoul has rightly been careful to avoid provoking retaliation through the Kremlin's relationship with North Korea. South Korea appears to have left the door open for some type of relationship with Russia in the future, and the Kremlin may also show restraint to maintain ties with Seoul.

Though it is not clear how much pressure Washington exerted on South Korea, there is little doubt that the Biden administration hoped for a vigorous response from all its allies to support Ukrainian sovereignty. The alliance has needed some repair work from past administrations, and Biden has placed great emphasis on the value of allies in his foreign policy (Roehrig 2022). Though a cautious ROK response did not negate the importance of a strong alliance, the unity of an allied effort did matter to the United States and helped demonstrate to Washington that the alliance could be a valued asset beyond the Peninsula.

Another security-related issue was made clear by President Zelenskyy in his speech to the National Assembly. In June 1950, a US-led international coalition of 16 countries under the authorization of the United Nations came to South Korea's defense. Though some of these participants offered minimal contributions to the war effort, many were instrumental in defending the fledging ROK and establishing an important marker for collective security. Coming to Ukraine's assistance offered an opportunity for South Korea to repay some of this debt—but more importantly, to lay the needed groundwork for the future. In the years ahead, South Korea may need military support for some type of conflict contingency on the Peninsula, or financial assistance to help rebuild and integrate an economically troubled North, if reunification were to happen under peaceful circumstances. Mobilizing a future coalition on South Korea's behalf will be much easier if Seoul has done its part in the past. In addition, South Korea's participation in a strong international coalition in Ukraine may have a deterrent effect on Pyongyang;

any temptation North Korea might have to move against the South poses the likelihood that a broad coalition of states would come together to support South Korea in a fashion similar to Ukraine, helping reinforce deterrence.

## CONCLUSION

Sadly, the horrors of the Russian invasion of Ukraine are likely to continue for some time, with an outcome that remains uncertain. Evaluations of the war's impact on international relations and regional security, both in Europe and Asia, are also ongoing, with these judgments equally unclear. For South Korea, the war forced a reassessment of ROK–Russia relations and the broader role South Korea plays in international security, as befits a country with the 10th-largest economy and aspirations to be an important player in global affairs. The war demonstrated that in the years ahead it may be more difficult to adopt a cautious strategy that does not include a more active ROK role in supporting a stable and peaceful international order.

After the Cold War, ROK–Russia ties began with optimism for the potential this relationship could have in economics and helping bring peace to the Korean Peninsula, both important interests for South Korea. While the economic ties showed some promise, they did not reach the levels of success many had hoped for, and Russia provided little help in dealing with North Korea. But hopes for the potential of this relationship remained. Moreover, there were concerns that Moscow could be a troublemaker for ROK security should relations not remain cordial.

The invasion of Ukraine forced a reassessment of the ROK–Russia relationship. Initially, South Korea pursued a hedging strategy that sought to maintain some semblance of its past connection with Russia while also registering its concerns regarding Russia's actions. Seoul was quick to call out Russia for starting the war, but it also sought, as it had in 2014, to keep the door open to a working relationship with Moscow. Yet it soon became clear that these circumstances were different and it would be much more difficult to maintain a similar strategy. The tensions between these conflicting interests—maintaining ROK–Russia bilateral relations versus challenging Moscow's breach of international law and state sovereignty—became more difficult to balance.

The future of ROK–Russia relations is difficult to predict, and the impact of ROK sanctions on the South Korean economy remains to be seen. But

regardless of South Korea's participation in international sanctions, the war was likely to have a serious impact on its economy. In the end, South Korea decided that it had more to gain from the broader set of interests tied to maintaining international peace and security than from bilateral ties with Russia. South Korea is likely to face more of these difficult decisions in the future.

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