



ROK Perspectives on Indo-Pacific Security

The Republic of Korea (ROK) security interests are being increasingly impacted by the war in Ukraine. The most important consequence of the conflict is the empowerment and emboldening of a nation that has been a perennial national security dilemma for both Seoul and Washington: the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK). The ROK suffers what could be called the collateral damage that the Ukraine war and the Russia-DPRK alliance it has produced. To address these issues the ROK is likely to invest in more minilateral groupings in the Indo-Pacific region as opposed to the previous practice of bilateral arrangements. These minilateral cooperative formations are likely to include the US – along with allies that share similar values – these being liberal democracy and a free-market economic system.

War in Ukraine and Indo-Pacific Region

As with many other nations that are not in immediate proximity to the Republic of Korea (ROK) – but nations throughout the entire world – perspectives on security in the Indo-Pacific Region have undergone a rather considerable metamorphosis in the past few years. The simple reality, as an American music critic and producer said of a composition by a famous Brazilian artist more than 30 years ago, is that very simply "nothing comes from nothing and everything is somehow related to something else."

It is a simplistic statement, but what it means in the world of international relations in general and in Asia-Pacific security policy in particular is that the entire community of nations is interconnected on multiple levels. Therefore, in the current world there cannot be a military conflict involving major world powers that eventually does not impact on

most if not all their allies in all regions of the globe. Sooner or later the interests of one of the protagonists' major allies will be affected and intertwined whether they like it or not.

In the case of the ROK, the security interests of this leading military and economically dynamic ally of the US – along with its Indo-Pacific partners – are being increasingly impacted by the war in Ukraine. But journeying back as recently as 2021 the probability of that connection was not at all recognised by those who should have seen it as inevitable long before it actually came to pass.

A specific example would be how in December 2021 many in the US defence and international affairs community, as well as some number of Washington's allies, looked rather passively at the potential consequences for a Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Their view was that such an act on the part of Russian President Vladimir Putin would have little to no ripple effects. It would remain contained to the immediate European region, they said. The rest of the world would be isolated from any of the dislocations or new alignments in the security sphere.

One senior US national security official, speaking to me two months before the Russian invasion, told me he was convinced that the US and its allies would have to "settle down and normalise relations with Moscow." The path to accomplish that, he said, was to just "let the Russians have Ukraine."

That way Moscow will feel its empire is restored, and the US could be free from its European obligations and "all of our resources could now be focused on China." This was the – as they say – "conventional wisdom" of that time. This was December 2021, moreover, and the then-Biden Administration had been in office for 11 months at this point. Indicating clearly that this viewpoint was neither a Republican nor Democratic perspective on international relations. It had adherents up and down the foreign policy and defence establishment.

As we all know now, it was an exceedingly naïve view of how just such a conflict would play out. The consequences of Russia's invasion are today felt around the world and have enveloped and impacted the security of more nations than anyone back in 2021 could have ever envisioned.

Therefore, given the details of what we see before us now, the leadership of the ROK could be forgiven for arriving at the conclusion that of all the nations not directly involved in the Ukraine-Russia conflict, no single state's security interests in the Indo-Pacific region have been adversely impacted more than their own.

Implications For the ROK

What the Ukraine war has meant for the ROK, one of the US's closest allies, has been the empowerment and emboldening of a nation that has been a perennial national security dilemma for both Seoul and Washington: the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK).

The list of developments that have had a negative impact on the ROK and the overall Indo-Pacific security environment are numerous – and becomes longer with each day. Many of them result from Russia having made the decision to turn to Indo-Pacific nations to solve its own problems with resources. Likewise Moscow has been devising means of circumventing the restrictions imposed on them by sanctions and trade embargoes with its Indo-Pacific partners.

The adverse consequences of the war for the ROK in no particular order of significance, are:

- An increase in the national security risks.
- Disruptions in trade relations.
- Financial losses for ROK companies.

In the first category, which has immense impact on the other two, is one of the principal causes for the escalation of these national security risks. It stems from the DPRK's deepening military cooperation with Russia. This has in turn evolved into a tripartite arrangement in which the North Korean state and the People's Republic of China (PRC) have become the two of the greatest enablers of Moscow's war effort.[1]

This began by Pyongyang supplying Russia with millions of artillery shells and other munitions, then tens of thousands of troops, followed by tens of thousands of factory workers to replace Russian workers sent to the front. This influx of resources has made it possible for Moscow to continue a war that it would have long ago been forced to shut down for lack of men and materiel.

But, as we now know, that was only the beginning.

A symbiotic Russia-DPRK relationship emerged and grew into a full-fledged defence-industrial alliance between these two nations. Institutions and news services focused on the development of Pyongyang's military capabilities assess that one of the most prevalent and alarming by-products of this alliance has been what the partnership with Russia has done for its North Korean ally's nuclear programme.

According to these several independent assessments, there is evidence of significant Russian assistance in several areas of the DPRK nuclear effort. A few of the more relevant technologies that Moscow is now believed to have passed on Pyongyang are:

- Advanced techniques in uranium enrichment, which is the essential element in producing a weapons grade quantities of the element sufficient for the constructing of a functional nuclear warhead.[2]
- Provision of assistance and working hardware essential to the Korean People's Army (KPA) development of nuclear-powered propulsion systems for its ballistic missile submarine fleet. This gives these submarines once limited by how much diesel fuel they can carry now almost unlimited range.[3]¹

The DPRK's state-controlled Korea Central News Service (KCNA) also reported that the submarine being built by the KPA that was slated to receive this reactor appears to be of significantly larger dimensions than the US Navy's *Virginia*-class nuclear attack submarines. KCNA also stated that it this sub represented an "epoch-making" upgrade in Pyongyang's nuclear war capability and is designed to

¹ Jung Min-kyung, "Is Russian Technology Behind North Korea's New Nuclear Submarine, *Korea Herald*, 28 December 2025. It bears mentioning that the timing for the release of this story is regarded by some analysts as somewhat suspect. Coming this close to the celebration of Christmas it would receive the minimum attention in western media circles.

be another level of deterrence against an attack by the US or other western powers.[3]

- There has also been an overall increase in the level of Russian involvement in assisting the DPRK with the construction and operation s of its nuclear research and development complexes.

The Missile Lab and Sanctions Evasion

But then there is the fact that any nuclear weapon requires a delivery system with acceptable levels of accuracy for that weapon to constitute a real threat. This was a fact also not lost on the Russians when it came to providing defence-industrial and technical assistance to its North Korean ally.

The assistance provided by Moscow in this regard has turned some of the DPRK's designs from what were once laughable excuses for battlefield weapons into some of the most accurate short-range ballistic missiles (SRBM) in any nation's inventory. Much of this can be credited to the Ukraine war having now lasted longer than any other armed conflict in modern European history.

This has facilitated a "creeping modernisation" to take place within the KPA due to lessons learned on the battlefields of Ukraine. Russian engineers and missile designers have had ample time to observe operations of the KPA's missile forces. So much so that they were then able to analyse the relevant missile telemetry and make numerous design modifications to these missiles.

These missiles are now performing so much more effectively that their Russian-upgraded variants are adding to the range of missions they can perform. It was this fact that prompted a warning from Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelenskiy this past July - about the danger these new models and their ability to present a significantly expanded target set posed to any nation that has these DPRK weapons based close to their borders.

"All of this poses a threat to every country in Asia that lies within range of North Korean missiles," he said. The Russians' design improvements, are part and parcel the reason

why those familiar with these improved DPRK design configurations are calling the cooperation between Moscow and Pyongyang in this field “a ballistic missile lab.” [4]

Shortly thereafter Zelenskiy revealed that his country’s own design analysis specialists had discovered the configuration changes Russia had made to the North Korean missiles. This occurred when some of the DPRK’s Russian-improved models had been discovered either partially or completely unexploded after they had been fired and then soft-landed on Ukrainian territory.

He did not disclose the locations they were retrieved from or in what quantities, but the overall analysis of the Russian design modifications is that they have improved the accuracy of these missiles by up to 300 per cent. This was based on specific inspections of Russian-improved models of the KN-23 and KN-24 models of SRBMs.[5] “It is absolutely clear that North Korea will continue to build its experience in modern warfare, receive licenses from Russia, and receive all kinds of military tools from them,” said the Ukraine president.

But beyond these tangible defence technological boosts given to the DPRK by Russia, there is an undercurrent of activities that supports these weapons programmes and makes them all possible in many respects. Specifically, this is the degree to which Moscow and Pyongyang have cooperated in running a multilayered set of illegal actions that span the globe and collectively amount to what has been labelled as “sanctions erosion.”

This activity is so pervasive that the two nations have literally transitioned from a massive clandestine sanctions-busting campaign that they had at one time taken great pains to conceal into an out-in-the-open, transactional partnership. In the process the two nations have systematically dismantled the international sanctions enforcement framework.

Among other details, Moscow has helped North Korea bypass UN security measures and blocked international monitoring of the regime. Russia has also shared its own expertise in utilising intermediaries to complete illegal transfers. This is practice Moscow perfected during the Cold War as a means of acquiring defence-applicable technologies that were denied by an international regime enforced by the US and its allies.

The active, industrious drive to circumvent sanctions creates what has been called a “common market of autocracies.”

“This is a structure that “presents a serious longer-term threat to the United States and its allies because it bolsters the ability of these autocracies to aid each other in sustaining themselves. Through a barter version of comparative advantage, Kim [Jong-un] can provide Putin with an item that Putin urgently needs and that Kim uniquely produces or stockpiles (such as North Korean artillery shells and ballistic missiles).” [6]

It is in this environment that the ROK suffers what could be called the collateral damage that the Ukraine war and the Russia-DPRK alliance it has produced. Namely, the aforementioned disruptions in trade relations and ensuing losses for ROK companies.

Some of the prime examples of this were the corporate losses the ROK faced after joining the international, post Ukraine-invasion sanctions against Russia. These were coupled with ROK companies being forced to divest themselves of assets. Leading ROK firms like the famous automaker Hyundai were forced to sell their local factories in Russia at a significant loss.

Shipbuilders – another major ROK industry – were forced to cancel active contracts, and some of the leading South Korean electronics manufacturers halted operations due to severe supply chain disruptions. And like many other nations, the sanctions regime imposed on Russia caused global commodity and energy price fluctuations. These increased economic pressures on the ROK’s import-dependent sectors of the economy.

This makes it clear that the ROK – through no fault of its own – gets the proverbial “worst of both worlds.” On one hand the Ukraine war has had follow-on developments that create new national security challenges that will cost billions for Seoul to address effectively.

At the same time, the sanctions regime that the war has produced has imposed no small costs to the ROK economy. What if they had a war and you weren’t involved – just off to the side – but you had to play a huge cost for it anyway. That seems to be the situation Seoul finds itself in.

Clash With Traditional Regional Security Objectives

As if this were not a perplexing enough disposition as it is, the forces acting against the ROK's security interests are such that they make the country's adherence to its more or less traditional security objectives problematic. The centrepiece of the ROK's perspective on Indo-Pacific security had centred on its ambition to become a "Global Pivotal State."

In this role the country would be actively formulating and creating the structure for a regional order through rules, norms, and bilateral alliances. Overall, Seoul has been striving to create this rules-based regional order – even if the international rules-based order has taken a bit of a beating in the past few years. The latter phenomenon again due largely because of the Ukraine war.

Illustrative of Seoul's officially-stated design to create just such a regime, its security strategy has emphasised freedom of navigation, the rule of law, and human rights. These ideals are in concert with the Western-accepted frameworks for regional and international security. Simultaneously, the ROK has also avoided actions that would translate into a declarative and aggressive containment of the PRC.

These are all understandable parameters, particularly when one considers that the ROK had always had its own security agenda which sometimes does and sometimes does not run in parallel with that of Washington and its other Asian allies. It is a delicate balancing act and the greatest "unbalance" in the entire equation is now the DPRK with its ever-present nuclear programme and missile threats to Seoul.

The ROK also regards its economic prowess as a critical component of its national security structure. Beyond its armed forces and the industry that supports it, Seoul values economic stability, critical emerging technologies like semiconductors and quantum computing, as well as secure critical mineral supply chains, as fundamental components of national security.

So, how might the ROK transpose its long-cherished national security policy goals into the current environment – an environment that by any objective criteria has turned the set of assumptions that the country had operated under for decades upside down.

This is likely to manifest itself into more minilateral groupings in the Indo-Pacific region as opposed to the previous practice of bilateral arrangements. This is seen as a relatively new but intriguing development. These minilateral cooperative formations are likely to include the US – along with allies that share similar values – these being liberal democracy and a free-market economic system.

Examples given that represent this manner of arrangements are the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue and the AUKUS partnership. However, there is the fact that most regional minilateral groupings to date are led by the US-led.

What may well be the future for the ROK in Indo-Pacific partnerships will be regional groupings that include Australia, and Japan. These arrangements would be expected to be supportive of US policy but without Washington as one of the core members. This would provide the ROK and any other partners with more autonomy.

It is, however, more likely than not that the security environment in the region will continue to evolve away from something resembling what it once was – to a new set of partnerships. It is, once again, proof that everything is connected to everything else. A war in the centre of Europe has changed the circumstances for a nation as powerful and advanced – as well as being so far away – as the ROK. The question is how effectively Seoul can adapt.

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