In the Wake of Russia’s Invasion of Ukraine, Korea Should Join Its Peers in Defending the Liberal International Order

Gi-Wook Shin

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has set off a geopolitical storm that portends seismic shifts in the international order. This conflict, which has been compared to Nazi Germany’s invasion of Ukraine in 1941, is becoming the largest and most devastating war in Europe since the end of World War II. There are fears that this could mark the beginning of a new Cold War, or even escalate into World War III. Ukraine’s fierce resistance, supported by the United States and the European Union, has thwarted Russia’s hopes for a decisive victory. It is difficult to anticipate exactly how this conflict will transform the international order. However, it is almost certain that the war will mark a major turning point, just as the Cold War started in 1945 and the era of globalization began with the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991.

VOICES FROM UKRAINE

While the international community is seized by a deep sense of urgency, the mood in Seoul is one of apathy, bordering on nonchalance. Before the presidential election on March 9, Lee Jae-Myung, the candidate of the then ruling Democratic Party of Korea, used the conflict to take a swipe at his opponent Yoon Suk-Yeol’s lack of experience. Lee said that “a political novice became president and openly called for NATO membership, which provoked Russia and resulted in a military conflict.” The People Power Party, the leading opposition party, responded in kind by criticizing the Moon Jae-In administration’s opposition to South Korea becoming a nuclear power, claiming that Ukraine had been attacked because it lacked nuclear weapons.

When Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky delivered a virtual address to South Korea’s legislature at an auditorium in the National Assembly’s library on April 11, only one-fifth of the 300 lawmakers were present. This stands in stark contrast to Zelensky’s addresses to lawmakers in the United States, Japan, the United Kingdom, Germany, France, and also the European Parliament, where there were no empty seats in sight and Zelensky was given a standing ovation. Foreign media outlets wryly noted that South Koreans, who experienced war only 70 years ago, now seemed to be much more interested in the falling price of Russian king crabs than in the horrors of the conflict in Ukraine.

As these events unfolded, I had the opportunity to speak with a former high-level government official from Ukraine with a doctorate in physics, who is at Stanford for one year as a visiting scholar. She said that “Russia’s invasion is nothing new. For Ukrainians, this is something that has happened for hundreds of years in our country’s history.” In 2014, Russia seized Ukrainian territory when it forcibly annexed Crimea. Korea is no stranger to such events. Surrounding by great powers, it suffered countless invasions throughout its history. When I asked about the expected outcome of the current conflict, this visiting scholar emphatically said that “we will win in the end,” and also called upon democratic countries—including South Korea—to join forces in defending the international order, protecting international norms, and resolutely condemning the atrocities committed by the Russian military.

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For many Koreans, the sheer gravity of Russia’s invasion is not immediately tangible. Seoul is far from Kyiv, and Korea is not as exposed to the national security and economic implications of the crisis as Europe. There is sympathy in some quarters to Moscow’s claims that Russia had no other choice in the face of NATO’s eastward expansion, and some even float conspiracy theories about how this is all part of a U.S. strategy to increase its influence over Europe.

If the international order undergoes a fundamental realignment as a result of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, there will be significant ramifications for South Korea. The current crisis brings to mind Japan’s defeat and the subsequent division of the Korean Peninsula in 1945, as well as the chaos unleashed by the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. Fortunately, South Korea has so far turned geopolitical crises into opportunities, using them as a springboard to become a developed country. There is, however, a formidable challenge looming on the horizon.

Through its own painful history, Korea knows what it means for the right to self-determination—recognized by the international community—to be trampled upon by a great power.

To successfully chart a safe course for South Korea in its foreign relations, the Yoon Suk-Yeol government must be highly attuned to the twists and turns of today’s geopolitical undercurrents. A new international order defined by an ideological struggle between democracy and authoritarianism will leave no room for strategic ambiguity. Seoul’s hitherto strategy for balancing its relationships with the U.S. and China will be rendered obsolete. Policy visions of South Korea as a mediator for North Korea or Seoul being in the “driver’s seat” on the peninsula could become a fantasy. It is vital to consider South Korea’s economic interests with China and account for the unique characteristics of inter-Korean relations. However, South Korea should pursue a foreign policy rooted in international norms and based on values such as human rights, democracy, and sovereignty.

RUSSIA’S WAR CRIMES

As a responsible member of the international community, South Korea cannot remain a bystander to Russia’s imperialistic behavior. Through its own painful history, Korea knows what it means for the right to self-determination—recognized by the international community—to be trampled upon by a great power. In particular, South Korea must raise its voice in unequivocally condemning the widespread war crimes that are being committed in Ukraine.

War crimes refer to criminal acts that take place during armed conflict. This includes deliberate attacks against civilians or civilian structures such as homes and hospitals, rape and enforced prostitution, and the use of poisonous weapons, all of which constitute serious violations of human dignity. The horrific atrocities committed by the Russian military across Ukraine since its invasion on February 24 are profoundly disturbing. It has committed mass murder against civilians in Bucha, Borodyanka, Motyzhyn, and other locations; it has shelled humanitarian corridors intended to provide safe passage for refugees; and it has launched airstrikes against maternity hospitals and schools, taking the lives of Ukrainian children. The world has been taken aback by the unthinkable brutality of Russia’s military forces.

On April 7, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken said “more and more credible reports of rape, killings, torture are emerging” every day. He implied that the true scale of Russia’s atrocities may be much larger than currently understood.

This is certainly not the first time that the world has seen war crimes. After World War II, there were war crimes in Vietnam, Cambodia, the former Yugoslavia, Syria, and Myanmar. However, the brutality inflicted by Russian forces in Ukraine is incomparable in its severity and intensity. Unlike war crimes committed during a civil war, Russia has committed crimes against the citizens of another sovereign state. In an April interview with The Times, former White House advisor Fiona Hill noted that Putin “has switched from trying to capture the country to ‘annihilation.’” President Biden has also labeled the Russian military’s actions as “genocide.”

It is not yet possible to determine whether Russia truly has genocidal aims against the Ukrainian people, but there are growing calls in the international community to bring Putin to justice for war crimes. The most direct way to achieve this would be for him to stand trial at the International Criminal Court (ICC). In March, the ICC announced that it had begun its investigation into alleged war crimes committed by the Russian military. However, Russia formally withdrew from the ICC in 2016.

The ICC does not have the authority to act on its own, and it requires the cooperation of relevant states to arrest suspected war criminals. It seems highly unlikely that Putin will ever face trial at The Hague. Because the ICC does not hold trials in absentia, a trial cannot proceed unless Putin is arrested within Russian territory. After the wars in the former Yugoslavia, former President Slobodan Milošević stood trial before an international criminal tribunal on charges of genocide and war crimes. Unlike in the case of Milošević, prosecuting Putin does not appear to be a feasible option at this time. Even so, South Korea must actively join the international community in sanctioning Russia for its actions in Ukraine.

THE THREAT OF SHARP POWER
It is especially troubling to note that Russia’s invasion of Ukraine is taking place in the midst of a worldwide democratic recession. According to Freedom House’s latest annual report, for the past 16 years, more countries experienced a decline in freedom than countries that saw a growth in freedom.4 The Third Wave of democratization, which began in the 1970s, has now given way to the “Third Reversal.”

There has been an authoritarian shift during the COVID-19 pandemic, in which governments claimed a public health rationale to infringe upon individual freedoms or delay elections. In Hungary, one of the most prominent examples of democratic decline in recent years, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán achieved a landslide victory in the April 3 parliamentary elections to secure a fifth term in office.

In particular, there are growing concerns about the consequences of “sharp power,” which China and Russia have deployed across the world. Unlike traditional “hard power” (military and economic) or “soft power” (cultural), sharp power refers to the use of covert means to exercise influence. Dark money, economic leverage, and intelligence operatives are used to coerce a target state into complying with particular demands. Authoritarian regimes have engaged in information and ideological warfare as part of this effort.

Larry Diamond, a professor at Stanford University and a renowned scholar of democracy, warns in his book Ill Winds that the future of democracy will be bleak if liberal democracies, including the United States, do not defend against China and Russia’s sharp power. In 2016, the Russian government interfered in the U.S. presidential election in a blatant display of its sharp power. If fascism from Germany on the right and Bolshevism from the Soviet Union on the left threatened to destroy the international order in the 20th century, it is now China and Russia’s sharp power that poses the most serious danger to democracies across the world. It is in this context that Russia launched its invasion of Ukraine.

THE END OF GLOBALIZATION
Russia’s invasion may have sounded the death knell for globalization. Joining a growing chorus of observers, David Brooks declared in his New York Times column on April 8 that “globalization is over.”5 After the end of the Cold War, it seemed that the United States would usher in a new era of globalization, with the whole world coming together as one. During the presidency of Kim Young-Sam (1993–98), South Korea also joined this rising tide by pursuing a policy of globalization. A seemingly unstoppable wave of neoliberal globalization swept across the entire world in the late 20th and early 21st century. While the September 11 attacks were truly devastating and were later followed by the Iraq War, these events did not fundamentally alter the international order.

Today, we face a much greater challenge. Democracy is in retreat across the world, and barriers to trade are on the rise. Anti-immigration sentiments are widespread across the West, including in the United States. Brexit and the rise of Trumpism embody these global trends. Moreover, the pandemic has disrupted global supply chains. Cross-border exchanges are being slowed by rising trade barriers, and many countries are suffering from high inflation as prices skyrocket. The South Korean economy, which relies heavily on international trade, is being pummeled by these economic shocks. If countries take steps to reduce their dependence on other countries, then globalization gradually unravels.

Populist leaders have seized this moment, marching under the banner of chauvinistic nationalism. Twenty-first-century populist leaders are defined by two traits: anti-elitism and anti-pluralism. By challenging the West and opposing a pluralistic world, China and Russia have emerged as “populist” powers on a global scale.

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emerged as “populist” powers on a global scale. Just as the Korean War marked the beginning of the Cold War in earnest, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine may prove to be the first test of resolve for democracies in their struggle against authoritarianism.

The powerful sanctions enacted by the United States and the European Union against Russia underscore this sense of urgency. With the UN Security Council in paralysis, Washington coordinated with Brussels to impose a series of sanctions against Moscow. Only two days into the invasion, Russia’s Central Bank was removed from SWIFT. These “shock and awe” sanctions, which President Biden called the most powerful and wide-ranging sanctions ever imposed in history, were rolled out with the speed and precision of a sophisticated military operation. The ruble tanked as over $1 trillion of Russian assets were frozen. The 11th-largest economy in the world was pushed to the edge of a sovereign default. More than 300 global companies, including Apple, Google, ExxonMobil, and McDonalds, have shuttered their operations in Russia. During a recent conversation, a senior Google executive told me in no uncertain terms that “it will be difficult to return to Russia, even after the end of the war.”

The international community’s support, as well as the devastating sanctions imposed against Russia, have shored up Ukrainian morale as its people rally around President Zelensky. International public opinion is firmly behind Kyiv as more and more people around the world seek to help Ukrainians in their struggle against the Russian dictator.

In Germany and elsewhere, there are deepening fears that maintaining close economic ties with China, which remains friendly toward Russia, could become a critical weakness for Europe.

**THE REBIRTH OF SINOCENTRISM?**

The crisis in Ukraine has had a decisive impact on U.S. foreign policy. The Biden administration’s flagship Indo-Pacific Strategy is centered on working with its partners in the Quad—Japan, Australia, and India—to check the rise of China. Until early this year, the prevailing concern in the United States had been the possibility that China would launch an invasion of Taiwan. Biden’s decision to withdraw from Afghanistan, in the face of heavy criticism from home and abroad, was motivated by a need to focus on the Indo-Pacific Strategy. While Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has vigorously revived the transatlantic relationship, the United States now has to contend with both Russia and China at once. India’s reluctance to fully participate in sanctions against Russia, despite its key role in the Quad, is also cause for concern in Washington.

While Putin envisions the re-establishment of the Soviet Empire, Xi dreams of a rebirth of Sinocentrism. Having forcibly imposed its will on Hong Kong, there are growing concerns that China could use military force to bring Taiwan under its thumb. Beijing’s ambitious Belt and Road Initiative evidently seeks to go beyond economic cooperation and form a new China-led bloc built on economic assistance. In addition to bilateral trade disputes, decoupling between the United States and China in the high-technology sector is accelerating. The Biden administration is taking steps to bolster economic security, with the so-called Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) as its strategic centerpiece.

While China is currently pursuing a relatively loose form of cooperation with Russia, Putin and Xi, both populist leaders on the global stage, could join forces in earnest to upend the international order. At the same time, Prime Minister Modi of India, another populist leader, is taking an ambiguous stance. He has kept his distance from Washington and Brussels in terms of imposing sanctions against Russia, and he has stepped in to expand India’s imports of cheaper Russian oil.

Since Russia’s invasion, there has been a sense of crisis among European capitals about the dangers of excessive energy dependence on Moscow. There is also growing apprehension about a national security crisis emanating from China. Although Europe and China have clashed in recent years over the repression of Uyghurs in Xinjiang and bans on Chinese technology, there was an underlying consensus about maintaining friendly economic relations. Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has significantly altered Europe’s calculus, however. In Germany and elsewhere, there are deepening fears that maintaining close economic ties with China, which remains friendly toward Russia, could become a critical weakness for Europe. Michael McFaul, a colleague at Stanford and a former U.S. ambassador to Russia, has stressed that the outcome of the war will have lasting implications for the future of

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6 In the May 21, 2022 Joint Statement issued after the U.S.-South Korea summit, Presidents Biden and Yoon “commit to cooperate closely through the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF), based on the principles of openness, transparency, and inclusiveness. Both leaders agree to work together to develop a comprehensive IPEF that will deepen economic engagement on priority issues, including the digital economy, resilient supply chains, clean energy, and other priorities geared toward promoting sustainable economic growth.” President Yoon delivered virtual remarks at the May 23 summit that launched the IPEF, making South Korea a founding member of this initiative.

7 India joined the IPEF as a founding member, with Prime Minister Modi attending the May 23 launch summit in Tokyo in person.
the liberal international order. In other words, a Russian victory will further entice China to invade Taiwan, with profound global consequences.

South Korea cannot afford to remain an idle spectator to the conflict in Ukraine. There could be serious repercussions for Seoul, much sooner than expected. At a moment when the international order could rapidly change, it would be highly imprudent to sit on the sidelines or take a position of strategic ambiguity. Over the past five years, the Moon Jae-In administration adopted an ambiguous stance in its foreign policy, with a disproportionate focus on North Korea. The end result was diplomatic isolation. Moreover, Russia’s invasion reminds us once again of the importance of values and norms in international politics. The right to self-determination—the right of citizens of a given state to determine their own destiny—is a basic principle of the international community, enshrined in Article 1 of the UN Charter.

**THE NEED FOR A CONSENSUS ON “CORE INTERESTS”**

The once-popular paradigm of *an-mi-gyeong-joong* (“the United States for security, China for the economy”) is now obsolete. It is time for South Korea to seriously consider a foreign policy based on common values. While accounting for economic interests, it is critical to formulate a consensus on its “core interests”—that is, on fundamental political values. The rising tide of anti-China sentiment among South Korea’s youth is rooted in their rejection of China’s illiberal, authoritarian *modus operandi.* They want to stand side-by-side with fellow liberal democracies, in opposition to authoritarian powers. This is part of a global trend. According to a 2021 poll of 17 advanced economies by the Pew Research Center, unfavorable views of China were near “historic highs.” 88% of respondents in Japan, 80% in Sweden, 78% in Australia, 76% in the United States, 63% in the United Kingdom, and 71% in Germany held unfavorable views of China. 77% of respondents in South Korea indicated the same—the highest ever recorded by Pew for Korea.

In its policy toward North Korea, Seoul should avoid overemphasizing the “special” nature of inter-Korean relations on the basis of belonging to the same ethnic nation. It should also abandon the illusion that it can act as a mediator between Pyongyang and Washington.


Seoul’s North Korea policy should be cognizant of the larger context of today’s international politics, which is defined by a competition between authoritarian regimes (Russia, China, North Korea) and liberal democracies (United States, European Union, South Korea). As transatlantic cooperation on security issues intensifies, South Korea should also strengthen its ties with Europe. It was thus timely for Yoon Suk-Yeol, while he was president-elect, to send special envoys to the United States, Japan, and the European Union. The U.S.-South Korea alliance should also serve as a basis for Seoul to broadly solidify its relations with fellow democracies across the world.

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This does not imply that South Korea must proclaim an “anti-China” policy stance. It is also unnecessary to needlessly provoke North Korea. Nonetheless, South Korea should clearly declare to the world its resolve to honor and defend universal values, including democracy, human rights, sovereignty, and core international norms. It will face difficult decisions in its relations with Beijing, especially due to economic considerations, and it will be impossible to treat North Korea just like any other country. As will be the case with every other democracy, South Korea will have to confront vexing challenges as it seeks to pursue its interests while upholding its values.

Since 1945, South Korea has been the largest beneficiary of the post-WWII liberal international order. It is time for South Korea to defend democratic norms and help uphold the rule-based international order. There is no free ride. As the tenth-largest economy in the world, South Korea’s economic heft alone entails certain responsibilities. If democracy is defeated by authoritarianism, there will be no future for South Korea. Intellectuals and policymakers in the United States are keeping a close eye on how South Korea responds to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. They are hoping that Seoul will join hands with its fellow democracies in their arduous struggle against authoritarian powers.

**THE LESSONS OF KOREA’S HISTORY**

Watching Russia’s invasion of Ukraine brings to mind the painful and bitter history of Korea’s recent past, which was marked by the First Sino-Japanese War (1894–95),
the Russo-Japanese War (1904–05), and the Korean War (1950–53). South Korea did not succumb to adversity, however. It overcame formidable obstacles to become the economic and cultural powerhouse that it is today. As a result of its failure to appropriately respond to trends in international politics in the late 19th century, Korea lost its sovereignty. Amidst the chaos of division in 1945, the foundations for South Korea’s remarkable development were laid when it aligned with the United States instead of the Soviet Union. In 1991, at the end of the Cold War, South Korea pursued peace on the Korean Peninsula through its “Northern Policy,” also known as Nordpolitik. It is especially interesting to note that at key junctures in the history of the modern international order, conservative leaders (Syngman Rhee in 1945 and Roh Tae-Woo in the 1990s) played a decisive role in steering South Korea in the right direction.

Faced with the relentless march of imperialism across the world, Korea’s leaders and intellectuals in the late 19th century responded in one of three ways. The first group advocated for Western-oriented reform, calling for the adoption of Western institutions and practices to achieve modernization. Seo Jae-Pil and Syngman Rhee were prominent figures in this camp. Second, there were those who called for Asian solidarity. Under this view, Korea would join hands with China and Japan to resist Western imperialism. An Jung-Geun’s vision of “Peace in East Asia” is a famous example. Lastly, some responded with a focus on Korean nationalism. Sin Chae-Ho and Park Eun-Sik made significant contributions to this strain of thought.

In the end, Korea was unable to coalesce around a unifying vision for the country. The Joseon Dynasty failed to achieve modernizing reforms, and Korea became a colony of Japan. Seo Jae-Pil and Syngman Rhee left for the United States. Furious at Japan’s betrayal, An Jung-Geun assassinated Ito Hirobumi, a leading advocate of Asian solidarity, at Harbin in October 1909. Korean nationalism evolved in controversial directions under colonial rule, as reflected by Yi Kwang-Su’s theory of national reconstruction. Sin Chae-Ho, who wrote influential works of nationalist historiography, eventually turned to anarchism in his later years. This is the tragic portrait of a country, and of national leaders, who failed to gauge and adjust to shifting geopolitical winds.

With Japan’s defeat in 1945, the Korean Peninsula was once again thrown into a political vortex. Liberated from colonial rule, Korea was divided due to the strategic calculations of great powers. There was a tremendous loss of life not only during the Korean War, but also in the political instability that followed liberation. As the Cold War order began to take shape, North Korea stood with the Soviet Union. Fortunately, South Korea sided with the free world. Syngman Rhee played a critical role in this regard. Rhee was not well acquainted with Korea’s domestic politics, but he was perhaps the most perceptive Korean leader when it came to international politics. It is terrifying to imagine what may have transpired if South Korea had joined the communist bloc. Although Rhee’s legacy has been stained by his authoritarian rule, it is important to acknowledge his prescience in international affairs.

**STORMS ON BOTH FRONTS**

As the Cold War order collapsed in the 1990s, South Korea once again stood at a geopolitical crossroads. The Berlin Wall unexpectedly fell in 1989, and the Soviet Union was dissolved in 1991. Amidst this sea change in international affairs, the Roh Tae-Woo administration seized a historic opportunity. South Korea established diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union in 1990, entered the United Nations at the same time as North Korea in 1991, and normalized ties with the People’s Republic of China in 1992. By pursuing this audacious “Northern Policy” in the face of staunch opposition from some conservatives, the Roh Tae-Woo administration laid the foundations for sustainable development and peace on the Korean Peninsula. Perhaps the present moment, in which China and Russia are disrupting the international order, calls for a new Northern Policy that redefines Seoul’s relationship with Moscow and Beijing. The core of this new Northern

10 This was the foreign policy vision of the Roh Tae-Woo administration (1988–93). South Korea established diplomatic relations with the People’s Republic of China in 1992 and the Soviet Union (Russia) in 1990.

11 Yi Kwang-Su, an influential writer in Korea’s modern literature, published an essay called “On National Reconstruction” in 1922. In this essay, Yi called on Koreans to rectify undesirable traits in their national character. Yi was criticized, among other reasons, for ignoring the issue of achieving political independence from Japan.
Policy, of course, must be rooted in solidarity with fellow democracies against authoritarianism.

It is difficult to anticipate how the geopolitical storm set off by Russia’s invasion of Ukraine may develop. For the time being, it appears quite likely that this storm will grow into a major typhoon instead of fizzling out, but it is hard to tell how powerful it will be or what direction it will take. What is certain is that the international order will not be the same, and this change will have significant repercussions for South Korea.

In fact, South Korea may already be at the center of this storm. There is momentary calm in the eye of a typhoon, but the full force of its impact will be felt in due course. When South Koreans finally experience the damage from this storm in a few years, it may be too late.

The Yoon administration has barely sailed out of the harbor, but it is already being battered on two fronts. As noted in last month’s essay, which focused on domestic issues, South Korea’s democracy is heading into troubled waters. This essay has examined an external shock: the geopolitical storm raging across the world since Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. Both present formidable challenges for South Korea.

History unfolds in mysterious ways. Just as in 1945 and 1991, a conservative leader is once again in the wheelhouse as South Korea heads into a geopolitical storm. The Yoon Suk-Yeol administration must keep its eyes wide open and firmly grasp the helm as it navigates these troubled waters. Syngman Rhee and Roh Tae-Woo turned geopolitical crises into opportunities for South Korea. I sincerely hope that Yoon Suk-Yeol will also be able to chart a safe course for South Korea through the coming storm.

Translated by Raymond Ha