



**SOUTH KOREA'S PRESIDENTIAL  
ELECTION AFTERMATH: UKRAINE  
AS TEST FOR A "GLOBAL  
PIVOTAL STATE"**

BY MASON RICHEY

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South Korea has watched the tragic development of war in Ukraine and—like much of the rest of the world—come down firmly on the side of Ukrainians. Seoul city authorities have displayed blue and yellow lighting on buildings and monuments to show solidarity. President Moon Jae-in and Foreign Minister Chung Eui-yong have condemned Russia's invasion and voiced support to their Ukrainian counterparts. Nongovernmental and civil society groups have launched emergency charity and humanitarian efforts, and citizens have made donations. Most substantively, South Korea has [agreed to support and enforce](#) the sanctions—spearheaded by the United States and the European Union—to impose costs on Russia.

At the same time, South Korea has been focused on its March 9 presidential election, which resulted in victory for conservative opposition candidate Yoon Suk-yeol. With a new executive team soon to enter the presidential office and ministries, South Korea's approach toward Russia and the Ukraine war are likely to continue, but the new leadership may set different accents. New issues and challenges may also emerge depending on how the war evolves.

**The nail that sticks up gets hammered down?**

South Korea is a member in good standing of the international community. It is democratic, well-governed, prosperous, and peaceful. It follows international law and supports the rules-based order. Today, it does so regardless of which party is in power, so it was not surprising that Seoul chose to implement the economic sanctions, financial transaction lockout, asset freezes, and export bans against Russia. The Moon administration recognized that Russia's invasion is not just an attack against another sovereign state, but against sovereignty *tout court*—a concept a [formerly colonized nation](#) appreciates—and against the rules-based order generally.

That said, South Korea's principles are tempered by pragmatism, and the Moon administration was [mindful not to be too forward](#) in responding to Russian aggression. At first, the Blue House offered rhetorical support to Kyiv and called out the violation of Ukraine's sovereignty, but was slow to condemn Russia by name. South Korea was also a follower—not a leader—in the campaign to sanction Russian entities. Seoul's primary concern was potential blowback from Moscow, both economically and with respect to Russian support for inter-Korean relations.

South Korea has legitimate concerns, as it both [exports and imports products to/from](#) Russia. Nonetheless Seoul eventually acquiesced to the broad sanctions package, although it did negotiate inclusion on a US [waiver list](#) for certain export-ban items. Meanwhile, the Moon administration's worry about alienating Russia as a partner for inter-Korean relations seemed primarily reflexive. Inter-Korean relations have been stagnant for years due to North Korean recalcitrance, and Seoul is a long way from sufficient rapprochement with Pyongyang such that Moscow's support would be necessary.

For its part, Russia has indeed flashed its anger. South Korea predictably and understandably demurred from sending Ukraine lethal weapons, but that was not sufficient to prevent Moscow from placing Seoul on an ["unfriendly list."](#) Consequently, South Korean firms owed payment in non-Russian currency will have the debt settled in rubles, which have declined

drastically in value since the start of the war.

### Enter Yoon Suk-yeol

In contrast with Moon's progressive Democratic Party (DP), which tends to be more parochial and Peninsula-focused on foreign and security policy, Yoon's conservative People Power Party (PPP) privileges more comprehensive and geographically expansive alliance alignment with the United States. Indeed Yoon's campaign foreign policy statement committed to making South Korea a "[global pivotal state](#)." The Russia-Ukraine war will test that commitment.

First, Yoon will need to maintain current sanctions on Russia, even if they have a negative effect on South Korea's economy, or if Russia retaliates (including through cyberattacks). That will require crafting a narrative for the public, notably and convincingly underlining Seoul's global role. Beyond that, the United States and European Union may strengthen sanctions, which South Korea would be expected to endorse. That could include joining a ban on the import of hydrocarbons and petrochemicals (of which South Korea imports a modest amount). There may also be cases in which Washington and/or European capitals increase pressure on China to dissuade it from assisting Russia with sanctions evasion. As a "global pivotal state," Seoul may feel obliged to support such measures, which would risk South Korea's economic relations with its number-one trading partner.

Finally, depending on how the war develops, South Korea may need to engage in peacekeeping and post-conflict stabilization. Seoul may be called on to participate in rebuilding efforts in Ukraine, as well as in financial assistance programs. In addition to delivering these contributions, the challenge for Yoon would be to do so in a timely way, with South Korea out front and outspoken in bilateral and multilateral fora. This would signal that South Korea is now a "global, pivotal" leader.

### The specter of North Korea

Even a "global, pivotal" South Korea cannot escape the specter of Pyongyang, and the Russia-Ukraine war has provided (at this point provisional) lessons for the

Korean Peninsula. Those lessons are a mixed bag.

On the one hand, both South Korea and Kim Jong Un's leadership circle would very likely have understood how pyrrhic the Russian invasion has been. Swallowing and digesting a country with an appropriately armed and motivated population is a devilishly difficult endeavor. Furthermore, military operations with [poorly motivated](#)/trained soldiers and [shambolic logistics](#) is a recipe for disaster. Note also that South Korea is well-armed (and allied with the United States) and would be motivated to defend itself, while North Korea's military likely has poorly motivated/trained soldiers and [limited logistics capabilities](#).

Putin's Ukraine war illustrates why North Korea would be foolhardy to invade South Korea. South Korea is thus perhaps marginally safer from North Korean attack. Nonetheless Yoon will surely want to bolster deterrence by re-starting full-spectrum US-South Korea joint military exercises, which have [fallen by the wayside](#) under Moon (and partially due to COVID).

On the other hand, Putin's signaling of potential nuclear escalation in Europe highlights the nexus of the [stability-instability paradox](#), [nuclear coercion](#), and the escalate-to-de-escalate doctrine. Both South and North Korea will keenly watch to see what kind of effects Putin's nuclear brinksmanship produces vis-à-vis NATO and Ukraine, and whether Russia is able to meet some of its objectives in Ukraine by overcoming conventional military failure through brandishing nuclear weapons as both sword and shield. Yoon's national security team will watch this development and perhaps need to adjust South Korea's defense posture accordingly (in consultation with the United States), including especially extended nuclear deterrence.

### Conclusions

The Russia-Ukraine war will likely offer both opportunities and risks to the Yoon administration, and there are steps the administration can take to rise to the challenge. First, Yoon should prepare the ground for South Korea's enhanced prominence as a

“global, pivotal state.” Having greater voice in global and regional affairs increases influence and weight, but also means more responsibilities and costs. The South Korean public needs to be convinced of the value of this path. For example, Yoon has made a commitment to leading more in support of democracy and the rules-based order—this implies calling out the predatory behavior of certain states, which South Korea has not often done forcefully. Doing so can attract unwanted attention, and South Korea must be prepared.

On the conventional deterrence front, in addition to re-starting full US-South Korea joint military exercises, the Yoon administration should review South Korea’s defense procurement to make sure it has the right systems and equipment for national defense, notably for a nation with a [dramatically declining population](#) of males eligible for military service. In particular, the Yoon administration will need to take a hard look at the value of big-ticket items such as a planned [light aircraft carrier](#). The efficiency of resources allocated for [indigenous missile defense](#) assets will also require close examination.

As for extended nuclear deterrence, Yoon may wish to reiterate his openness to the United States eventually re-stationing [tactical nuclear weapons](#) in South Korea, although Washington has already rebuffed this request during his campaign. More plausibly, Yoon and his senior security and defense officials should consider working more closely with Washington on nuclear planning for the Korean Peninsula, with the objective of further institutionalizing shared nuclear planning and strategy, akin to NATO.

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