

# KOREA PROGRAM ON SECURITY AND DIPLOMACY

August 2022

## Speech at the Korea Global Forum for Peace, “Implications of the war in Ukraine for the Korean Peninsula”

**Dr. Antoine Bondaz**



FONDATION  
*pour la* RECHERCHE  
STRATÉGIQUE

**Speech at the Korea Global Forum for Peace,  
“Implications of the Ukraine war for the Korean Peninsula”**

**Antoine Bondaz**, Ph.D., is Director of the FRS-KF Korea Program on Security and Diplomacy at the Foundation for Strategic Research (FRS) and teaches the course “Demystifying North Korea” at Sciences Po.

**The FRS-KF Korea Program on Security and Diplomacy** aims to provide a better understanding of key issues on the Korean Peninsula through the organization of conferences, the publication of interviews and articles. This program is not limited to inter-Korean relations alone and aims to address South Korea more broadly as a global power on the international scene.

*Les opinions exprimées ici n’engagent que la responsabilité de leur auteur.*

**Speech at the Korea Global Forum for Peace,  
“Implications of the Ukraine war for the Korean Peninsula”**

*This publication is the text of a speech pronounced by Dr. BONDAZ at the Korea Global Forum for Peace organized in Seoul by the Ministry of Unification of the Republic of Korea. Participants included CHOI Yonghwan, Senior Research Fellow at the Institute for National Security Strategy; KIM Jaechun, Professor at the Sogang University; KIM Hyun-wook, Director-General and Professor at the Korean National Diplomatic Academy; and Eric BALLBACH, Korea Fellow at the SWP, Berlin.*

Since the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the most frequently drawn parallel is with the risk of China invading Taiwan. The impacts for the Korean peninsula are generally ignored even though they are numerous, direct and indirect.

The war in Ukraine is a source of learning. In these introductory remarks, I will cover four dimensions: the renewed prominence of nuclear-related issues; the overall negative impacts of the war for South Korea; the overall positive impacts for North Korea; the aggravation of the crisis in the peninsula.

## I. THE GREAT RETURN OF NUCLEAR-RELATED ISSUES

The Russian war against Ukraine is in many ways a conflict “in a nuclear atmosphere”. First, Russia sheltered behind its nuclear capability in what we could describe in France as “aggressive sanctuarization”. Second, the fears aroused by the military operations around the Ukrainian nuclear power plants (Chernobyl, Zaporizhia). Third, President Putin’s multiple explicit and implicit references to the Russian nuclear deterrent, and his decision to change the operational status of strategic forces. Fourth, the clumsy arguments of some experts, fortunately not from government, who believe that we will do nothing militarily against Russia because it is a nuclear power.

This war reminds us of the importance of strategic communication and nuclear signaling. And it is no coincidence that in April 2022, North Korea, through the voice of Kim Yo Jong, signaled a *de facto* change in its nuclear doctrine by implying that it could use nuclear weapons in a military conflict against South Korea even without US military intervention. It is a very concerning statement that we may have not focused enough on.

I do not want to get too much into technical and operational considerations in this panel, but the war in Ukraine has reopened expert discussions about a possible lowering of the nuclear threshold and the use of tactical nuclear weapons. Since 2019, North Korea has conducted several dozen tests of new short-range missiles, ballistic, near-ballistic, guided rockets, etc. Most studies underestimate the importance of short-range missiles, and two fundamental parameters: the accuracy of these missiles and their ability to penetrate adversary defenses. The development of a short-range arsenal thus represents a real capability development that could change the balance of power on the peninsula.

A strategy based on the graduation of the strikes, from the tactical to the strategic level, would, for example, lead to a capacity for the regime to manage the escalation, including at the conventional level, and would offer the country non-negligible crisis management tools. This hypothesis of coercive conventional ballistic strikes has gained credibility since the Iranian strike against the American base of Al Asad in Iraq in January 2020, and clearly highlights the usefulness of precision-strike systems for a minor military power confronted with a major power.

## 2. OVERALL NEGATIVE IMPACTS FOR SOUTH KOREA

Since the beginning of the war, South Korea has had to clarify its tightrope foreign policy. The explicit condemnation of Russia and the adoption of economic sanctions obviously have a political and economic cost for South Korea. So yes, this may reduce the room for maneuver for South Korea, which intends to maintain stable relations with both China and Russia, but it is indispensable to support Ukraine by limiting Russian capabilities and avoiding a Russian military victory.

And clearly, the sanctions prevent certain economic opportunities from being seized, especially in the oil and gas shipping sector for South Korean shipyards, and Koreans just like Europeans are suffering from inflation. Yet, a strict implementation of sanctions, a clear condemnation of Russia and a strong involvement in international initiatives to mitigate the impacts of the war, especially in terms of food security, are essential. As such, a South Korean explicit and financial support to the International Food and Agriculture Resilience Mission (FARM) initiative for food security in the most vulnerable countries would be more than welcome. To be a G7+ country comes to even greater commitment.

A clear reminder from the very first days of the war in Ukraine is that intelligence is essential to anticipate military action. Prior to the invasion, the United States had reliable intelligence coming from the highest level of Russian political *élite*. We can regret that some countries did not believe in its credibility. For South Korea, this raises two fundamental questions: how to get reliable human intelligence from a closed country like North Korea, including insights from the top leadership, and how to convince North Korea of South Korea's total determination to fight in case of an attack. Comes with a question of credibility when we keep announcing something that does not happen. We should avoid crying wolf.

## 3. OVERALL POSITIVE IMPACTS FOR NORTH KOREA

Although North Korean diplomats do not say so publicly, as Pyongyang's official position is that Moscow did not invade Ukraine, they do say in private that one of the major lessons of the war is the need not to give up nuclear weapons. And since Kim Jong Un came to power, these weapons have been institutionalized, meaning that they are no longer simply owned by the regime, but an integral part of its identity, making their abandonment almost impossible. These weapons are deterrence weapons, but also identity weapons that reinforce the legitimacy of the regime as part of its survival strategy. The war in Ukraine only reinforces this.

North Korea's strategic value to Russia is also increasing, and we are just reliving the precedent of 2014 of, following the invasion of Crimea and Western sanctions, a rapprochement between Pyongyang and Moscow. Since the beginning of Russia's war on Ukraine, North Korea has strongly sided with Moscow. Alongside Eritrea, Belarus, and Syria, North Korea was one of the four foreign countries that voted against condemning Russia's military intervention at the UN. Pyongyang recognized and formed diplomatic ties with the “People's Republics” of Donetsk (DPR) and Lugansk (LPR), two separatist territories in eastern Ukraine. However, it is still too early to see what economic concessions Russia might offer without openly violating UN sanctions. On the other hand, it is quite possible that within the Security Council, Moscow is now seeking to make diplomatic concessions to Pyongyang, protecting the country despite its provocations, and I will talk about this later.

Finally, the war in Ukraine reminds us of the power of nuisance and the power of economic disruption that Russia has today, and our electricity and gas bills are just evidence of it, and that North Korea could have tomorrow. Apart from the impact of sanctions obviously, the economic consequences of the war in Ukraine are limited, as the Ukrainian economy has a limited importance in global supply chains. This is not the case for South Korea, which is at the heart of global value chains. Pyongyang already seems to have sufficiently precise strike capabilities to carry out selective strikes against economic targets with a high industrial added value. Let me be straightforward, this deterrence capacity focusing on economic targets is unique to date, as no other major industrial power is exposed to strike systems capable of durably affecting entire sectors of the economy, sectors that are key to global value chains, this with a relatively limited number of weapons.

#### 4. THE AGGRAVATION OF A CRISIS IN A DEADLOCK

In 2018, despite the unbridled international optimism triggered by the three inter-Korean summits and the first summit between Chairman Kim and President Trump, I was playing the role of the killjoy, pressing cautious optimism instead. Today, unfortunately, I think we must talk about cautious pessimism, and I will conclude on this point. The war in Ukraine is aggravating the crisis in the Korean peninsula for at least three reasons:

- Trivialization because many are getting used to North Korean tests, especially ballistic ones, with more than 160 of them in the last decade, while underestimating the development of new short-range missiles; and because the response to these violations of UNSC resolutions is no longer automatic. We need to be clear in our condemnation.

- Distraction because while the war in Ukraine is legitimately at the top of the agenda, North Korea's nuclear and ballistic developments seem to be driven to the background. In recent months, North Korea has conducted several ICBM tests and the media coverage has been infinitely less than in 2017. It is essential to attract the interest and attention of the international community and here, this conference is more than useful.

- Division, finally, because for the first time since 2006 two permanent members of the UNSC vetoed a resolution to condemn and sanction North Korea for its violations of international law on May 26, which calls into question the very credibility of the UNSC. The Russian obstruction at the NPT RevCon a few days ago is another example of this division. I was with MoFA Deputy minister Ham at the UN in NYC in early August and our hopes vanished. The main beneficiary of such divisions is always North Korea and the loser is often international security.

While the war in Ukraine is far from over, the consequences are felt every day on the Korean peninsula. From the North Korean point of view, this war is a unique opportunity. From our point of view, this war is an immense risk, one of losing the North in every sense of the word. It is essential to remain focused on the problems on the Korean peninsula, including keeping proliferation risks to a minimum while caring about the lives of the North Korean people. Europeans, both at the level of the European Union and at the level of the Member States, have a role to play and can contribute through concrete initiatives, and I have extended multiple political recommendations on this score in recent years.

**FRS - KF** KOREA PROGRAM  
ON SECURITY AND DIPLOMACY

FONDATION  
*pour la* RECHERCHE  
STRATÉGIQUE