BIRDS OF A FEATHER: THOUGHTS ON PYONGYANG'S LESSONS FROM THE WAR IN UKRAINE

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I. INTRODUCTION

In the Policy Forum essay that follows, Alexandre Mansourov argues that the lessons learned from the Ukraine conflict by DPRK leadership may make the DPRK more likely to conclude that having nuclear weapons capability will not necessarily translate to victory in a war on the Korean peninsula, that the results of Russia's nuclear posturing during the war conflict will make the DPRK less likely to resort to nuclear weapons use, that the DPRK will be more likely to consider and perhaps pursue "nuclear sharing" arrangements with Russia and China, that the DPRK would be more likely to insist on the exclusion of tactical nuclear weapons from any eventual nuclear arms control deal with the United States and the international community, and that the Ukraine conflict may affect how the DPRK thinks about nuclear facilities in both the DPRK and the Republic of Korea as potential targets during conflicts.

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This essay is a contribution to the "Reducing the Risk of Nuclear Weapons Use in Northeast Asia" (NU-NEA) project, a collaboration between the Research Center for Nuclear Weapons Abolition, Nagasaki University, Nautilus Institute, and the Asia Pacific Leadership Network for Nuclear non-proliferation and Disarmament, is to reduce and minimize the risk that nuclear weapons will be used in the region by developing better understandings of the processes that could lead to the first use of nuclear weapons and the potential outcomes of such nuclear weapons use. In the first year of this three-year project, the NU-NEA project team identified over 25 plausible nuclear weapons "use cases" that could start in Northeast Asia, sometimes leading to broader conflict beyond the region. These nuclear use cases are described in the report *Possible Nuclear Use Cases in Northeast Asia: Implications for Reducing Nuclear Risk.* The project has commissioned five contributions to update the cases, of which this essay is the first.

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Banner image: Kim Jong Un's ceremonial sword gift to Vladimir Putin at their summit on April 2019

from here (at 0.13 minutes)

II. NAPSNET POLICY FORUM ESSAY BY PROFESSOR ALEXANDRE Y. MANSOUROV

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Some Western analysts speculate that Democratic Peoples' Republic of Korea (DPRK) may have learned the following three lessons from Russia's war in Ukraine:

1. If Ukraine hadn't given up its nuclear weapons in 1994, it wouldn't have been attacked in 2022 – just like Iraq in 2003 and Libya in 2011. Hence, Pyongyang should not negotiate away its nuclear arsenal and strive to preserve its nuclear deterrence capability if it can.
2. Looking at the reluctance of Western powers to directly intervene in the war in defense of Ukraine, and at the reluctance of China to provide Russia with all-out military support, Pyongyang may conclude that Beijing is unlikely to come to the defense of the DPRK in the event of a United States-Republic of Korea (US-ROK) attack. Hence, the DPRK must rely only on its nuclear weapons arsenal to counter any Western aggression.
3. Russia's threat to use tactical and strategic nuclear weapons to deter Western powers from direct military intervention in Ukraine may have convinced the DPRK of the utility of nuclear threats for preventing the internationalization of the Korean conflict and for undermining the credibility of US-ROK extended nuclear deterrence.

We assess with a high degree of confidence that the DPRK doesn't need any additional justifications (such as "See what happened with Ukraine?"; or "See how unreliable international security guarantees are?"; or "Guess what? Nuclear threats actually work!", and so on) for preserving its nuclear deterrent. The North Korean leadership made up its mind on the strategic, military, political, and diplomatic value of the nuclear deterrent a long time ago, has no intention to give up its nuclear weapons, and needs no additional rationale to continue to strengthen its nuclear arsenal. Furthermore, it may be in the interests of the DPRK's enemies to convince the Kim regime as part of their strategic communications campaign that Pyongyang shouldn't trust its allies – China and Russia – in order to drive wedges, respectively, in the DPRK-PRC alliance and in DPRK-Russian strategic partnership. This doesn't mean, however, that Pyongyang actually believes in the enemy's message, and indeed derives its lessons from what it observes happening on the ground in Ukraine.

We judge with a moderate degree of confidence that Kim Jong Un, his key national security advisers, diplomats, and KPA (Korean Peoples' Army) military planners probably learned a very different set of lessons concerning the nuclear threat from the Russian war in Ukraine.

First, even a much weaker David armed only with conventional weapons can successfully resist a nuclear armed Goliath, if the "David" is backed by the right international coalition dedicated to all-out support in war and on the battlefield. In that sense, the strategic advantage that nuclear weapons capability accrues to Pyongyang may be neutralized by strong political will in Seoul and the US-led international coalition determined to back up the ROK government without reservations. The obvious lesson for the DPRK political leadership is that nuclear weapons capability doesn't equate with a war victory. Hence, the fact that the DPRK possesses nuclear weapons shouldn't make the Kim regime more likely to use them in the inter-Korean military conflict if it aims for victory, not

defeat.

Second, in several public statements, senior Russian officials, including President Putin and former President Medvedev, reiterated conditions under which Russia may use nuclear weapons in the ongoing war against Ukraine, including the threat to the very existence of the Russian state, a nuclear attack against Russia and its allies, and a high-precision conventional strike against Russian nuclear command and control infrastructure. They also stated that they didn't see such threats at present. Since the North Korean nuclear doctrine is still evolving, one can assume that Pyongyang took notice of these high-profile official statements while deliberating on the draft of the new Nuclear Forces Law adopted by the Supreme People's Assembly on 8 September 2022, which incorporated similar rational predispositions into the DPRK's nuclear doctrine. If this assumption is correct, even with some caveats, then the lesson of Russia's nuclear posturing during the war in Ukraine should make the DPRK leadership less likely to resort to nuclear weapons as long as the inter-Korean military conflict is guided by limited political and strategic aims and restricted to conventional warfare. In other words, we judge with high confidence that if the United States doesn't attack the DPRK with a preemptive nuclear strike, if Washington and Seoul don't threaten to decapitate the Kim regime and dismantle the North Korean state, and if the US-ROK alliance doesn't target the KPA's nuclear command and control center, then Pyongyang will not escalate from conventional warfare to nuclear warfighting.

Third, the war in Ukraine may also have taught the North Korean strategists an important lesson concerning the prospects for nuclear sharing. Here "nuclear sharing" denotes the possibility that Russia and/or China might, under certain conditions, extend what in ROK-US/Japan-US parlance would be thought of as a "nuclear umbrella" over the DPRK, meaning that Russia and/or China would be prepared to use nuclear weapons on an adversary that attacked the DPRK, that Russian or Chinese nuclear weapons could be deployed to DPRK territory, and/or that nuclear-capable technologies from Russia or China could be deployed to or sold to the DRPK. We judge with a moderate degree of confidence that escalating US-Russian total hybrid warfare and aggravating US-China confrontation makes the prospects of previously unthinkable nuclear sharing between Moscow and Pyongyang or between Beijing and Pyongyang not only possible but also probable in the era of intensifying great power rivalries. The fact that Moscow appears to be willing to upgrade the military capabilities of its close ally, Minsk, to enable the Belorussian military to counter the growing nuclear threat from NATO may lead Pyongyang to reach out to its ally China or strategic partner Russia to probe whether they might be willing to aid the DPRK in a similar fashion in response to the rising risk of nuclear sharing within the US-ROK alliance, let alone the military threat that the United States might use theatre nuclear weapons (TNWs) on the Korean theater of operations in any future conflict. The DPRK may have thus taken lessons from news such as:

- Belorussian President Lukashenko has widely publicized the facts that since the outbreak of war Russia has modernized Belorussian Sukhoi SU-24 attack aircraft[1] to carry tactical nuclear weapons, and has agreed to transfer the nuclear-capable Iskander SRBMs to Minsk in order to counter the increased risk of the US nuclear sharing with the NATO allies, especially Germany and Poland.
- According to open sources, the United States and ROK governments are determined to intensify their consultations aimed at strengthening extended nuclear deterrence, including the possibility of nuclear sharing within the US-ROK alliance.

Fourth, the purported Russian threat to use tactical nuclear weapons in Ukraine is made more credible by the fact that no Russian-American strategic arms control agreements, including the START-III agreement, which is still in effect, covered or cover tactical nuclear weapons, which means that Russia is allowed to deploy TNWs anywhere within its territory without violating its

international obligations. The evident lesson for the North Korean negotiators in talks with the United States and others is that the DPRK needs to insist on the exclusion of TNWs from any strategic arms control deal with the United States so that the Kim regime can deploy such weapons anywhere in DPRK territory as it deems necessary, especially if the threat of war were to rise on the peninsula, thereby strengthening the credibility of its nuclear war-fighting posture. As such, it may be taking a page from the Russian nuclear playbook:

- In peacetime, all Russian TNWs are usually stored in centralized warehouses, but as the danger of war began to rise, some TNWs may have been moved to the specialized nuclear-technical warehouses located in forward areas closer to Russia's Western border.

Fifth, the Ukrainian attacks by drones, heavy artillery, and MLRS against the Zaporozhiye Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP) controlled by Russia in the newly-occupied territory, which have targeted adjacent electricity transmission lines, administrative support buildings, a nuclear waste site, a nuclear fuel storage facility, and nearby residential buildings, has likely caught the attention of the KPA military planners as well, for two reasons: the possible wartime utility of civilian nuclear infrastructure - the Yongbyon nuclear complex in the DPRK and the nuclear power plants in the ROK.[2] Pyongyang may have learned the following lessons from the ZNPP situation:

- On one hand, one lesson from the Ukrainian actions involving the ZNPP concerns the possible fate of Yongbyon: even if Pyongyang is forced to surrender it as a result of a Western military intervention, the KPA should continue to harass the occupying force from a distance while blaming its artillery strikes and drone attacks on the allied forces (just as Kiev groundlessly blames artillery and drone strikes on the Russian forces that actually occupy the ZNPP). The KPA should also call for the introduction of the IAEA inspections to monitor the situation on the ground and for the establishment of the demilitarized zone around Yongbyon to create a diplomatic distraction for the Western allies, restrict their freedom of movement around Yongbyon, and possibly allow DPRK government forces to return to Yongbyon to run it under the IAEA monitoring.
- On the other hand, one lesson from the Russian actions involving the ZNPP concerns the possible wartime utility of the nuclear power plants in the ROK: instead of targeting them in the counter-value missile strikes aimed at demolishing the ROK's critical infrastructure, the KPA should consider seizing and holding them with special operations forces that could either shut them down temporarily or disconnect them from the ROK's energy grid, thereby depriving the ROK's defense production facilities of electricity supply. Alternatively, the KPA control over the ROK's nuclear power plants (even one) could make these facilities primary targets for enemy fire and counterattacks, which could significantly raise the risk of a man-made nuclear disaster on ROK territory. On the diplomatic front, Pyongyang could take advantage of the KPA's operational control over the ROK's nuclear power plants (even one) and appeal to the IAEA and international community to restrain and dissuade the attacker from carrying out counter-offensive operations around the ROK's nuclear sites in order to spare civilian populations and avoid nuclear disasters.

III. ENDNOTES

[1] Sukhoi Su-24 (NATO reporting name: Fencer) is a supersonic front-line bomber designed to penetrate hostile territory and destroy ground and surface targets in any weather conditions.

[2] Although the official position of the US government and the dominant narrative in the Western press is that the Russian military is responsible for the attacks on the ZNPP, or at least that a full accounting of responsibility for the attacks is not yet settled, it is very difficult to believe that Russians would shell the nuclear power plant that their forces occupy, and they effectively physically

control, or that Russians would be so incapable in artillery fires that they would repeatedly inflict damage by friendly fire on their own troops deployed at the ZNPP on a virtually daily basis. Moreover, Russia considers the area in which the ZNPP is located to be a part of Russia, which is yet another reason it would not be attacked by Russian forces. See, for example, the official speech of Oleksandr Shevchenko, a senior Russian diplomat, delivered on September 7 at the ongoing session of the UN General Assembly in New York, in which he summarizes the Russian perspective on the Ukrainian bombardments of the ZNPP: "Russian diplomat blames Ukraine for creating risk of accidents by shelling ZNPP," Russian News Agency TASS, Moscow, September 7, 2022, accessed on September 8, 2022, at https://tass.com/politics/1504561. In fact, however, independent of which nation ultimately proves responsible for the attacks on the ZNPP, the bottom line for the purposes of this essay is to determine which narrative about the ZNPP attacks one thinks the North Koreans would **believe**, that is, the one forwarded by the Russians, or the Western narrative, which the DPRK will most likely dismiss as having been concocted by the "enemy-state" US and its "puppet regime" in Ukraine—the latter of which has recently broken off diplomatic relations with the DPRK. For the purposes of this essay, it is assumed that the answer is obvious—the DPRK will believe the Russian narrative, and that narrative will inform the lessons that Pyongyang may be learning from what has transpired on and around the ZNPP.

IV. NAUTILUS INVITES YOUR RESPONSE

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