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North Korean Provocations and the Assurance Challenge for the ROK-US Alliance

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Introduction

2022 has so far been an annus horribilis for much of the world but not for North Korea. Its regime accords special significance to decadal anniversaries and 2022 marks the triple anniversaries of the birth of Kim Il Sung 110 years ago, that of Kim Jong Il 30 years later, and the 10th year of Kim Jong Un's reign. As if to highlight the importance regime attaches to the current year, North Korea has launched 70 ballistic missiles as of November 18th, the most ever in a single year in its long history of missile provocations.¹ On November 2nd alone it launched a total of 27 ballistic and surface-to-air missiles and aimed one of the missiles, which later turned out to be a Soviet-made SA-5 surface-to-air missile, to the south of the Northern Limit Line (NLL) for the first since the Korean War ended in 1953.

There have been other milestones this year: the regime broke its self-imposed moratorium on ICBM tests, which had been in effect since 2018, by testing a brand-new model of ICBM – Hwasong-17. In September the North promulgated a new nuclear legislation that effectively threatened pre-emptive nuclear strikes against South Korea and Japan with nuclear weapons. North Korea has fired almost 1,000 artillery shells toward the maritime buffer zone, putting the 2018 Inter-Korean military agreement in jeopardy.

Despite the unprecedented scale of North Korean provocations, what North Korea is engaged in is neither escalatory nor new: on the contrary, it is part of a military-diplomatic campaign that aims to delegitimize joint US-ROK exercises while advancing nuclear and

missile capabilities when the world's attention is focused on Ukraine. Far from joint exercises causing North Korea to launch provocations, it was North Korea that had launched short- and long-range ballistic missiles fifteen times even before this year's first joint exercises took place in April. But the addition of nuclear dimension to North Korea's long-term campaign at delegitimizing joint military exercises has created new challenges for the alliance.

For the United States and South Korea, the exercises not only serve to enhance readiness and deter North Korea's aggressive behavior, but they are also a means to assure South Korea of the US's commitment to its defense. Deterrence defined by the narrow criterion of preventing North Korea from attacking the South is clearly working. But the alliance is unable to deter North Korea from carrying out provocations below the threshold of actual conflict.

The key challenge for the alliance today is to ensure assurance as well as deterrence. As Santoro and Warden (2015) puts it, assurance goes beyond effective deterrence as it requires the United States to foster and maintain a firm belief in its allies that it will come to their defense should deterrence fail.² North Korea's repeated demonstrations of nuclear-capable delivery systems aim to discredit such belief, and joint exercises that only focus on conventional deterrence fail to assuage Seoul's nuclear fears.

Henceforth North Korean "provocations" aim to incite decoupling between Washington and Seoul and sow doubts about US extended deterrence, showing that undermining assurance is an important strategic objective for North Korea. Meeting the increased demand for assurance with more explicit nuclear deterrents will not only assuage the fears of US allies in the region about North Korea's unfettered nuclear challenges, but it will also demonstrate to Pyongyang that its expensive provocations are ultimately futile, and perhaps it may even reassess the strategic value the regime attaches to nuclear weapons.

Signaling through “Tit-for-Tat”

What seems like an escalatory spiral between North Korea and the United States/South Korea with exercises followed by missile launches is in reality repeated affirmations of well-established signals, albeit for different audiences. As Michishita Narushige³ has put it, North Koreans attempt to achieve diplomatic objectives through the use of military means. The core element of North Korea’s long running military-diplomatic campaign is to establish a tacit equivalence between ROK-US joint exercises and its nuclear and missile development programs.

North Korea’s mainline objective is to achieve the “dual suspension” of joint exercises and nuclear and missile tests.⁴ This would have significant negative repercussions on the force readiness of the alliance, the impact of which would grow exponentially the longer the exercises remain suspended.⁵

So why the obsession with the exercises? Because joint military exercises in general have dual functions of “maintaining readiness, deploy ability, and logistical and combat proficiency” but can also be used “as demonstrations of force to underscore determination to defend national territory/interests and those of allies and partners.”⁶ In other words, it would not be too far-fetched to claim that once joint exercises are suspended between the United States and South Korea then the alliance will incur real risks of becoming superfluous and ineffective. As such, the establishment of equivalence is the key first step towards negotiating the exit of the United States from the peninsula from the regime’s perspective.

This “equivalence” that is sought by North Korea is sometimes spelled out explicitly: one recent example was the letters that Kim Jong Un exchanged with US President Donald Trump in 2019. The letters showed that Kim had insisted Trump cancel the joint exercises for the sake of US-DPRK dialogue. And when the exercises went ahead anyway, he ordered the launch of short-range ballistic missiles as “advice” to “double-dealing” South Koreans.⁷

Within the general framework of establishing an equivalence between the exercises and its WMD programs, North Korea also adjusts its response according to the perceived level of threat. The massive missile barrage on November 2nd was in part due to the inclusion of F-35 stealth fighters among the 240 aircraft involved in the Vigilant Storm air exercise. F-35, due to its stealth nature, is believed will form the tip of the spear in any leadership decapitation operations.⁸

But if the alliance was putatively signaling lethal intentions, North Korea was reciprocating the gesture: the use of KN-23/24 short-range ballistic missiles that North Korea claims to be its chosen tactical nuclear delivery system as part of its response to Vigilant Storm strongly echoes the new nuclear law North Korea had promulgated in September, in which decapitation operation by outside powers was one of the grounds for nuclear use.⁹ And the barrage was not only meant to signal proportionality, mimicking the scale of the allies' air exercise, but it was also aimed at overwhelming missile defenses with the sheer number of projectiles.

Opportunities for Developing WMD Capabilities

Another important motivation for North Korea besides establishing an equivalence between missile and nuclear programs and the alliance's joint military exercises is to take advantage of the dysfunction in the United Nations Security Council to advance its missile and nuclear programs without fearing being sanctioned by the international community.

As the war in Ukraine rages and the US-China strategic competition intensifies, two of the five permanent members of the UN security council, China and Russia, have little incentive to cooperate with the international community in formulating and enforcing sanctions in response to North Korea's severe violations this year. In fact, the joint exercises can even provide a convenient cover for China and Russia to excuse North Korea's serial violation of UN resolutions that they themselves had agreed to in the past.

Sanctions, despite North Korea’s vehement claim to the contrary, do have an impact on their strategy. Although sanctions by themselves did not prevent North Korea from acquiring advanced nuclear and missile capabilities, they raised economic costs to such a degree that the regime made sanctions removal a primary condition for any meaningful denuclearization and is clearly motivated to avoid further penalization.¹⁰

So long as the UN Security Council remains paralyzed, North Korea would be immune to new sanctions measures and this would partly explain why North Korea launched four ICBMs in a span of just a month, immediately following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine on February 24th. This opportunistic behavior indicates that the driver for the rapid rate of ICBM tests by North Korea is primarily technological. Excluding nuclear tests, both the number and level of North Korean provocations in 2022 are already above the 2017 level but there has not been a single new sanctions resolution passed this year whereas there were four in 2017.

Nevertheless, the most recent and successful test of Hwasong-17 on November 19th represents the convergence between the two drivers of North Korean provocations. It took North Korea eight tests in just as many months to successfully test its latest ICBM. The regime’s strategy of accelerated testing shows that it took advantage of the favorable external environment. North Korea also justified its action as a response to the ROK-US-Japan trilateral summit in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, in which the three countries agreed to deepen security cooperation and strengthen extended deterrence. In a statement by North Korea’s foreign minister Choe Son-hui issued two days before the test, the regime attacked the trilateral joint statement and again tried to establish equivalence between its provocations and “provocative and bluffing military activities” of the United States.¹¹

The Logic of US and South Korean Moves:

In contrast to complex North Korean motivations, for Washington and Seoul the main motivation for joint military exercises remains straightforward: restore readiness and keep ROK-US combined defense posture effective and relevant. In announcing the resumption

of large-scale field training military exercises in August, which had been on hiatus since 2018, South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol said, “only exercises that mimic real life can firmly protect South Korea’s national security and the people’s lives.”¹² These lofty words were a reminder of the original military aim of these joint military exercises, which resulted in decades-long institutionalization of the combined forces posture between the US and ROK militaries.

It is important to remember that joint exercises originated in the backdrop of a shadowy war of aggression waged by North Korea against the South throughout the 60s. The so-called “Second Korean War” (1966-1969), in which hundreds of South Korean soldiers, civilians, and US servicemen were killed,¹³ the United States and South Korea engaged in intense efforts to integrate the two nations’ militaries into a highly effective combined force, culminating in the establishment of the Combined Forces Command (CFC) in 1978.

At the center of the combined deterrence posture lies the joint military exercises. As the US involvement in Vietnam deepened with the intensification of the war in the late 60s, the United States drew down some of its forces in South Korea for the war in Vietnam just as when North Korea was intensifying its cross-border infiltration operations against the South.

To beef up the defenses and deter further North Korean incursions, the United States and South Korea greatly scaled up joint exercises, by incorporating elements of reinforcement from the US mainland. The first “Focus Lens” exercise in 1968 featured three infantry battalions of the 82nd Airborne Division flown non-stop from the US mainland to demonstrate how rapidly the United States could respond to North Korean threats, thereby strengthening deterrence against the North.¹⁴

But back in the present era, as North Korea wages an intense military-diplomatic campaign to establish the notion that its missile (and nuclear) provocations are proportional responses to joint ROK-US exercises, it is the demand for assurance rather than deterrence that is increasing in Seoul. The concern for many in Seoul is that joint exercises, which have originally been designed to fend off North Korea’s conventional threat, and as such lack the

provisions for nuclear attacks by the North, cannot by themselves tackle the threat. This mismatch between what the exercises are preparing for and the reality of North Korea's growing nuclear threat, especially its tactical nuclear capability, is exacerbating the concern in Seoul that assurance is increasingly lacking.

To be fair, joint exercises are not meant to address North Korean nuclear attacks, which is a task covered by the US extended deterrence with strategic nuclear weapons based outside the Korean peninsula. But growing calls in South Korea for the redeployment of US tactical nuclear weapons, or even the development of indigenous nuclear capability¹⁵ are tangible indicators of the inadequacy of joint exercises as they stand today to sufficiently assure South Korea against North Korea's nuclear threat.

Encouragingly, the alliance is showing signs that it is aware of assurance shortcomings. In light of growing nervousness in Seoul – and Tokyo – over North Korea's flexing of nuclear muscles, in the recent PR blitz top defense officials from the United States and South Korea posed in front of B-1B and B-52 strategic bombers¹⁶ and the United States declared that strategic assets would be deployed to the Korean peninsula on a “constant” and “routine” basis.¹⁷ These are positive and necessary steps towards greater assurance but not sufficient. What is required is the institutionalization of nuclear deterrence in the ROK-US combined forces posture.

Conclusion: Strengthening Assurance by Upgrading Combined Forces Posture

The United States and South Korea have so far focused the bulk of their efforts on strengthening deterrence rather than firming up assurance. Yet the joint military exercises, the preferred instrument for demonstrating deterrence and commitment to defend South Korea by the United States, are increasingly challenged by North Korea's robust nuclear development and the related military-diplomatic campaign to question the legitimacy of the exercises while legitimizing its own redline provocations.

Ultimately, North Korea aims to decouple threat perception between Washington and Seoul by heightening its nuclear threats. Pyongyang is inciting decoupling between Washington and Seoul by sowing doubts about US extended deterrence. This shows that undermining assurance is also an important North Korean strategic objective.

The key alliance response going forward should be about strengthening assurance. Assurance is less about whether the adversary is deterred but more about making US allies feel protected.¹⁸ The growing call in South Korea for redeploying tactical nuclear weapons in the country reflects the unmet demand for assurance in Seoul. While there is little the alliance can do militarily to prevent North Korea from carrying out missile launches and nuclear tests, it can and should do more to strengthen assurance.

Seoul and Washington should therefore work together to strengthen assurance commensurate with the rapidly growing North Korean nuclear and missile capabilities. Some of assurance concerns are due to the fact that alliance's defensive posture has not kept up with North Korea's evolving nuclear threat. Currently, US forces in South Korea are not prepared for waging nuclear war against North Korea as the nuclear deterrence task is borne by the US Strategic Command (STRATCOM). This contrasts with North Korea's nuclear doctrine that has delegated nuclear use authority to field commanders.¹⁹ The combined forces must therefore incorporate nuclear operations into its portfolio of capabilities to match the threats present in North Korea's new nuclear doctrine.²⁰

To prevent North Korea from ramping up provocations and further issuing nuclear threats, joint military exercises should incorporate components of nuclear deterrence. This may require adapting the command structure to be more integrated. Just as the "Second Korean War" period led to the institutionalization of combined forces posture through the establishment of Combined Forces Command and expansion of joint military exercises, the current cycle of North Korean nuclear threats will only subside when there is a clearer combined nuclear posture.

Finally, although it was declared as a non-starter by the Biden administration²¹, the United States and South Korea should not completely set aside the possibility of redeploying tactical nuclear weapons to the Korean peninsula if only to placate the growing call for redeploying tactical nuclear weapons back in South Korea. Dismissing such concerns out of hand can give rise to a wrong impression that Seoul and Washington have different priorities and threat perceptions, which in turn would affect the deterrence posture against North Korea.

As North Korea perfects its nuclear capability and the alliance ramps up its conventional and nuclear deterrence, the prospect of growing tension is inevitable. Although it seems as if the two sides are engaged in an endless tit-for-tat without ever resolving their differences, alas the current status quo is the optimal equilibrium one can reach with a single-minded, intractable opponent like North Korea. As North Korea's nuclear threat looms larger, the United States and South Korea should expand the scale of its joint exercises to match the growing threat perception. The resulting noise and tension would be inevitable, but so would be the payoff of assurance for South Korea.

¹The reported number of ballistic missiles, long-range artillery rockets, and surface-to-air missiles launched by North Korea differs by sources. In addition, not all launches have been verified by South Korea and the United States, which leads to further discrepancies. The number of missile launches included in this article has been compiled by the author based on Yonhap News reports.

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