



Reinforcing Deterrence: The U.S. Military Response to North Korean Provocations

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When speaking to a Korean audience, the commander of U.S. Forces Korea (USFK) invariably inserts the Korean phrase *katchi kapshida* (같이 갑시다), “we go together,” at some point in his remarks. U.S. responses to North Korean provocations have been grounded in its alliance with the Republic of Korea, a commitment of extended deterrence that has been in place since the signing of the Mutual Security Treaty in 1953. The USFK commander also often speaks of being able to “fight tonight,” whereby the alliance seeks to deter an attack on the South but should this fail, the alliance is ready to defend the ROK on short notice. Since the end of the Korean War, deterrence at the strategic level has held firm. Pyongyang has never tried to repeat the large-scale invasion it launched in 1950 to reunify the peninsula. However, it has never stopped conducting numerous smaller-scale operations to disrupt regional stability or destabilize the South, including the Blue House Raid (1968), the seizure of the USS *Pueblo* (1968), the Rangoon Bombing (1983), the downing of Korean Air 858 (1987), and submarine infiltrations along the East Coast (1996, 1998), among many others. Despite these numerous provocative and antagonizing actions, ROK and U.S. leaders were restrained in their responses, in large part, for fear that retaliation would start a dangerous escalation spiral, a prospect that put Seoul, only 35 miles from the demilitarized zone (DMZ), in harm’s way.¹

During the past few years, North Korean actions have become even more problematic with three nuclear weapons tests, numerous missile and rocket tests, and in 2010, the sinking of the ROKS *Cheonan* and the shelling of Yeonpyeong-do. Thus, while strategic deterrence has been stable, deterring lower level actions has been a problem, resulting in what scholars call the “stability-instability paradox.” B.H. Liddell Hart, one of the first to note the phenomenon, argued that “to the extent that the H-bomb reduces the likelihood of full-scale war, it increases the possibilities of limited war pursued by widespread local aggression.”² As it becomes increasingly likely that North Korea will not abandon its nuclear ambitions, a stability/instability paradox playing out in Korea becomes a serious possibility. In addition, neither South Korea nor the United States is likely to take military action to remove North Korea’s nuclear program or the Kim regime, leaving the strengthening of deterrence as the most likely course of action.³ Thus, as strategic deterrence remains stable, deterring lower level provocations remains one of the most difficult challenges for the U.S. military and the U.S.-ROK alliance. Consequently, measures to improve deterrence at these lower levels while also reinforcing strategic deterrence have been at the heart of U.S. military actions taken in Korea over the past two years and will likely remain the focus in the years ahead.

SECURITY DIALOGUE AND JOINT MILITARY EXERCISES

South Korea and the United States have maintained the alliance through a variety of regular, bilateral dialogue mechanisms and military exercises. These aspects have taken on increased urgency in the wake of North Korean nuclear weapon and ballistic missile tests along with other provocative actions and rhetoric. The dialogue and planning that has resulted provide an important tool for improving cooperation and collaboration between Washington and Seoul, while allowing the alliance to adapt and prioritize in an evolving security environment. In addition, these measures furnish opportunities for strategic messaging to North Korea that demonstrate the strength and resolve of the alliance.

The two most important forums for alliance dialogue are the Security Consultative Meeting (SCM) and the Military Committee Meeting (MCM). Both have been held annually in the fall since the late 1960s, alternating between Washington and Seoul. The SCM includes the U.S. secretary of defense and the ROK minister of defense, and produces a joint communique that is an important indicator of the military direction of the alliance. The document provides a threat assessment, a review of defense cooperation and joint capabilities, and a confirmation of the continued importance of the alliance. In the 2014 SCM, Minister Han Min-koo and Secretary Chuck Hagel “reaffirmed the two nations’ mutual commitment to the fundamental mission of the alliance to defend the Republic of Korea through a robust combined defense posture.”⁴ In addition, the communique highlighted the need for combined exercises and alliance readiness given the security environment since 2010, and “that any North Korean aggression or military provocation is not to be tolerated and that the United States and Republic of Korea would work shoulder to shoulder to demonstrate our combined resolve.”⁵

Occurring concurrently with the SCM, the annual MCM discusses more specific tactical/military elements of the relationship. The MCM group includes the chairmen of both the U.S. and ROK Joint Chiefs of Staff, the commander of U.S. Pacific Command, the ROK Joint Chiefs of Staff J5, and the commander of USFK who is also commander of the United Nations Command (UNC) and during hostilities, Combined Forces Command (CFC). The MCM does not produce a formal communique, but its deliberations feed into the discussions of the SCM.

In addition to these annual meetings, U.S. and ROK officials also maintain more frequent working level groups such as the Security Policy Initiative, Extended Deterrence Policy Committee, Strategic Alliance Working Group, Counter-Missile Capabilities Committee, and Cyber Cooperation Working Group among others.

Each year, ROK and U.S. forces conduct numerous joint exercises to ensure their ability to respond to a broad array of North Korean military challenges. Among these, they conduct three major joint exercises: Ulchi Freedom Guardian (UFG), Key Resolve (KR), and Foal Eagle (FE). Though these exercises have occurred for many years and sometimes under different names, for the past few years, they have been undertaken with particular urgency and an eye toward an evolving North Korean threat. The DPRK (North Korea) is notified of all the exercises in advance and conducts its own military exercises.

Lasting approximately two weeks, UFG is a computer simulation, command post exercise for multiple capabilities including intelligence, logistics, and joint air and space operations. In 2014, the exercise consisted of 50,000 ROK troops and 30,000 U.S. personnel with 3,000 of these coming from the United States.⁶ It works through a series of scenarios with the goal of improving alliance readiness for a North Korean attack. Prior to 2008, UFG was called Ulchi Focus Lens, likewise named for 7th-century Koguryo general Eulji Mundeok. The 2014 UFG was the first exercise to implement a new tailored deterrence strategy that addresses North Korea’s nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons capabilities.⁷

In the spring, ROK and U.S. forces hold two joint exercises more or less simultaneously. One is KR, a command post exercise that lasts approximately two weeks and is similar to the fall UFG exercise. KR began in 2008 replacing an earlier exercise, Reception, Staging,

Table 1. Regular Dialogue Forums – ROK-U.S. Alliance

Group	Purpose
Security Consultative Meeting	Minister-level discussions of alliance and security issues held annually.
Military Committee Meeting	U.S. and ROK high-level military discussions that parallel the SCM meetings and reviews the capabilities and readiness of U.S. and ROK forces.
U.S.-Korea Integrated Defense Dialogue (KIDD)	Oversees the work of all the collaborative working groups to coordinate ROK-U.S. security cooperation such as the EDPC, SPI, and SA 2015 Working Group.
Extended Deterrence Policy Committee (EDPC)	Improve shared understanding of U.S. nuclear weapons strategy and doctrine, and the U.S. nuclear umbrella.
Security Policy Initiative (SPI) working group	Policy-level meetings held several times each year to address a range of alliance issues, particularly those related to the future of the alliance and the security environment.
Strategic Alliance (SA) 2015	Planning group for the transfer of wartime OPCON.
Counter-Missile Capabilities Committee	Joint planning and consultation meetings to counter North Korea’s missile threat.
Cyber Cooperation Working Group	Develops strategy and doctrine regarding North Korea’s cyber capabilities and improves information sharing, coordination, and exercises to improve readiness.

Onward Movement, and Integration (RSOI), that began in 1994.⁸ KR focuses on exercising Korean operational plans (OPLANS)⁹ by working through various scenarios that are “designed to increase Alliance readiness, protect the region, and maintain stability on the Korean Peninsula.”¹⁰ Eighth Army Commanding General Lt. General Bernard Champoux noted in March 2014, “Exercises like Key Resolve keep us ready and our readiness directly contributes to peace and prosperity on the Korean Peninsula and stability in Northeast Asia. In Korea, we train like we fight – as a team. Because of exercises like Key Resolve and Foal Eagle, our joint and combined team is stronger and getting stronger.”¹¹ In KR 2014, 5,200 U.S. forces participated with 4,100 coming from the Korean Peninsula. South Korea provided 10,000 personnel, and four countries from the United Nations Command—Australia, Canada, Denmark, and the United Kingdom—also sent troops to the exercise.

The second spring exercise FE begins at the same time as KR but continues for a total of eight weeks. In contrast to UFG and KR, FE is a large combined and joint field training exercise that includes the flow of U.S. forces into Korea and force-on-force military operations for various Korean Peninsula scenarios. In 2014, FE forces consisted of 200,000 ROK personnel and 7,500 U.S. troops with participation from ground, naval, air, and special operations

units. Some units come from the United States to support key OPLAN responsibilities that help to exercise the flow of forces that might be necessary to defend against North Korean aggression. In 2014, the U.S. Navy sent four destroyers to join their ROK counterparts in exercises that practiced gunnery, communications, ship maneuvers, and logistics.¹² In 2013, U.S. Special Operations Task Force-13 sent 253 personnel for a three-day Balance Knife 13-1 exercise with ROK special forces. Its goal was to train in an environment that is very different and, in many ways, more difficult than circumstances in Iraq and Afghanistan, where these units have been operating for more than a decade. Focusing on initial entry into a denied area and the mission of developing indigenous resistance organizations, Balance Knife addressed the difficulties of operating in North Korea's mountainous terrain, overcoming its integrated air defense system, and transportation challenges.¹³ FE began in 1994 replacing the field exercise, Team Spirit, which from 1976 was designed to exercise the flow of U.S. forces to Korea in case of a North Korean attack and to send a strong signal of U.S. capability and resolve.¹⁴ It figured into the North Korean nuclear crisis in the 1990s when the exercise was suspended in 1992, held in 1993, and planned but not implemented from 1994 to 1996.¹⁵

One final aspect of the exercises is who is in command, or in military lexicon, who is the supported command and who is supporting. For years, the United States was in the lead and the supported command. With approaching deadlines for the transfer of wartime OPCON (discussed below), for some of the exercises, South Korea assumed the lead in anticipation of the transfer. Consequently, ROK commanders took on far more responsibility for planning and executing military missions, providing the opportunity for both South Korea and the United States to "rehearse" this change of roles and responsibilities. In 2013, South Korean military commanders assumed the lead in UFG, FE, and KR in preparation for the change. By the 2014 exercises, it seemed likely that the OPCON transfer would be delayed, and the United States again assumed the lead.

THE COUNTER PROVOCATION PLAN AND TAILORED DETERRENCE

After the events of 2010, U.S. and South Korean officials began to rethink deterrence in Korea in ways that not only looked at preventing a large-scale invasion but also focused on the dilemma of deterring lower level provocations. ROK officials had stated clearly after the shelling of Yeongpyeong-do that should the North choose to use military force again, there would be a response. To address the need for coordinated action against North Korean aggression, on March 22, 2013, U.S. and ROK officials announced the signing of a Combined Counter-Provocation Plan (CCP).

Details of the plan are classified, but reports indicate that South Korea will be in the lead to respond to any DPRK provocations that are short of a major war, but with the ability to request assistance from U.S. forces. The CCP provides a series of options for a joint response and according to one U.S. official, "defines action down to the tactical level and locks in alliance political consultations at the highest level."¹⁶ The spokesman for the ROK Joint Chiefs of Staff noted that the CCP improves South Korea's joint readiness posture to "quickly and firmly punish any kind of provocations of North Korea."¹⁷ The USFK press release announcing the CCP stated, "By completing this plan, we improved our combined

readiness posture to allow us to immediately and decisively respond to any North Korean provocation. The completed plan includes procedures for consultation and action to allow for a strong and decisive combined ROK-US response to North Korean provocations.”¹⁸

Since the CCP is designed to respond to North Korean actions short of all-out war, the U.S. lead during wartime OPCON and South Korea’s role in normal, peacetime armistice conditions do not change. However, the plan does raise serious questions of what types of actions are defined as low-level provocations short of war and when the situation becomes a “war” to prompt the United States taking the lead. Many analysts of Korean security have lumped all sorts of actions from bombastic rhetoric, nuclear weapons tests, and the sinking of the *Cheonan* as North Korean provocations, yet their character is very different. Trying to address the issue of differentiating between lower level, “local” DPRK actions where Seoul will be in the lead versus actions of war that trigger U.S. OPCON, a ROK JCS spokesman noted “it’s hard to answer this. On our end, if there is a local provocation on our land, we have to respond to it.”¹⁹

Alliances have long been not only about reassuring allies but also about a way for a country, particularly if it is the stronger state in the relationship, to exert some degree of control over its partner. For U.S. officials, this has been a part of the ROK-U.S. alliance since its inception and the need to control what was viewed as an unpredictable Syngman Rhee regime.²⁰ This motive was also likely present in concluding the CCP. When North Korea shelled Yeongpyeong-do, there were many indications that South Korea was ready to retaliate and, perhaps, escalate beyond striking targets associated immediately with the artillery barrage. In his memoirs, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates recalled: “We were worried the exchanges could escalate dangerously. The president, Clinton, Mullen, and I were all on the phone often with our South Korean counterparts over a period of days, and ultimately South Korea simply returned artillery fire on the location of the North Korean’s batteries that had started the whole affair.”²¹ U.S. officials were very concerned about the danger of escalation but recognized that South Korea truly meant what Defense Minister Kim Kwan-jin said at that time regarding any future attack: “Do not hesitate whether to shoot or not. Report after taking action first.”²² Victor Cha, Director for Asian Affairs on the National Security Council at the time recounted “Admiral Mike Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, made a special trip to the ROK in the aftermath of the *Cheonan* sinking and Yeonpyeong shelling (December 7, 2010). Ostensibly, this visit was for the purpose of showing alliance solidarity, since rarely does the top military official in the U.S. government make a trip solely to Korea and Japan. But Mullen’s trip was also out of concern that the new ROK rules of engagement were too overzealous.”²³

According to some reports, the United States and South Korea were ready to conclude a CCP in January 2013 but delayed the final signing. One press report noted, “U.S. officials appeared uncomfortable with South Koreans taking too aggressive a stance that could risk provocations escalating into full scale war as well as possible conflicts on armistice rules of engagement under the U.S.-led U.N. Command.”²⁴ Thus, for U.S. planners, rather than have the ROK military act alone, it would be better to have the United States be part of a response both in planning and carrying out any military action. Moreover, announcing the intention to have a joint response sends a strong deterrence message to North Korea that there are serious risks should Pyongyang attempt other kinetic provocations.

Though lower level provocations have been the more vexing concern, the United States and South Korea buttressed strategic deterrence as well. On October 2, 2013, officials signed the bilateral “Tailored Deterrence Strategy” that focuses on the threats posed by North Korea’s nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons program and lays out a broad set of options to counter these weapons. The strategy grew out of discussions in the Extended Deterrence Policy Committee (EDPC), a ROK-U.S. planning group formed in 2011 to improve bilateral understanding and planning for issues related to nuclear weapons and the U.S. nuclear umbrella. The strategy was formally announced at the conclusion of the October 2013 SCM in Seoul. The SCM Joint Communiqué noted that the strategy:

[E]stablishes a strategic Alliance framework for tailoring deterrence against key North Korean nuclear threat scenarios across armistice and wartime, and strengthens the integration of Alliance capabilities to maximize their deterrent effects. The ROK and the United States are committed to maintaining close consultation on deterrence matters to ensure that extended deterrence for the ROK remains credible, capable, and enduring.²⁵

Details of the tailored deterrence strategy remain classified, but some reports note that it contains options for preemptive strikes if North Korea appears to be preparing to use nuclear weapons.²⁶ Also, the strategy moves the U.S. nuclear umbrella into the formal planning process between the United States and South Korea.²⁷ In the spring of 2014, ROK and U.S. forces applied tailored deterrence for the first time to the KR and FE exercises. According to press reports, the exercises used training scenarios that involved North Korean nuclear and chemical weapons along with related crisis scenarios. From these exercises, defense planners will further refine tailored deterrence plans to better determine the conditions for implementing various strategy options, how the options will be utilized, and the reasons for undertaking any of these measures.²⁸

BALLISTIC MISSILE DEFENSE

One of the most serious concerns for defense planners is North Korea’s ballistic missile program, and its determination to increase this capability through testing. North Korea has 500 short-range SCUD missiles and 150-200 medium-range Nodong missiles capable of reaching all of South Korea and most of Japan. Work continues on longer-range systems such as the intermediate-range Musudan missile and the KN-08, which is believed to be an intercontinental ballistic missile.²⁹ Both are mounted on mobile launchers and have appeared in North Korean parades, but neither has been flight tested so it is unclear how close these systems are to being operational, despite North Korea moving them around publicly from time to time.³⁰ Over the past few years, North Korea has conducted numerous tests of short-range rockets and missiles, including short and medium-range ballistic missiles in clear violation of UN sanctions, and what North Korea touted as new tactical missile systems. Pyongyang is also working on a submarine-launched ballistic missile.³¹

To address the North Korean ballistic missile threat, the United States has continued efforts to increase its BMD assets in the region and is committed to building a region-wide BMD system that includes Australia, Japan, and South Korea. A key U.S. BMD asset in the region is its Aegis-class destroyers that are equipped with AN/SPY-1 radar and SM-3 surface-to-

air missiles capable of shooting down ballistic missiles at high altitudes. The U.S. Navy has Aegis destroyers based in Japan and has sent these destroyers to the Korean Peninsula during periods of elevated tension or pending North Korean missile launches. The Pentagon announced in October 2014 that it would be sending two additional Aegis destroyers to Japan by 2017.³² They combine with South Korea's *King Sejong the Great* Aegis destroyers as well as Japan's *Kongo*-class and *Atago*-class Aegis ships to help track North Korean launches, and if necessary, shoot down any missiles that are judged to threaten either U.S. ally. ROK Navy ships are not equipped with the SM-3 missile and cannot shoot down ballistic missiles, but there are ongoing discussions in South Korea for acquiring this capability.

Washington also deployed the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) missile defense system to Guam in 2013.³³ THAAD is a "hit-to-kill" system with a range of 200 km capable of reaching targets at altitudes of 150 km designed to shoot down short-, medium-, and intermediate-range missiles. The system also has an advanced AN/TPY-2 X-band radar that can operate independently or operate as part of a larger system. Though it is unclear whether North Korea has missiles that can reach and accurately target U.S. bases in Guam, Hagel sent the battery there in response to North Korean threats. In October 2014, the United States sent a second TPY X-band radar to its communications center in Kyoto, Japan to assist in tracking ballistic missile activity in the region. Beijing has not been pleased with U.S. efforts to build a regional BMD architecture. The Chinese Foreign Ministry complained, "the deployment of anti-missile systems in the Asia-Pacific and seeking unilateral security is not beneficial to strategic stability and mutual trust in the region. It is not beneficial to peace and stability in Northeast Asia."³⁴

Washington has also raised the possibility of sending a THAAD battery to South Korea to help defend U.S. forces on the peninsula. In June 2014, USFK Commander General Curtis Scaparrotti first recommended deployment of a THAAD battery, and at an October 2014 forum, Assistant Secretary Robert Work indicated discussions between Washington and Seoul continued, noting that the United States was conducting a site survey for possible deployment locations.³⁵ However, during a visit to Seoul in spring 2015, Secretary of Defense Ash Carter indicated Washington was not planning on formal discussions to deploy THAAD in South Korea.³⁶ Despite this uncertainty, THAAD is part of a much larger issue for the U.S.-ROK alliance.

For several years, the United States has been trying to convince South Korea to join its BMD system. Assistant Secretary Anita Friedt noted, "developing an interoperable regional missile defense architecture is an important future area of focus in light of the increasing nuclear and missile threats posed by North Korea. We believe that future trilateral cooperation between the United States, the ROK, and Japan can positively impact our deterrence efforts against North Korean aggression and send a powerful message of deterrence to the DPRK."³⁷ Japan joined enthusiastically in 2005, but South Korea has been reluctant due to cost factors and, more importantly, Chinese objections. In October 2014, a Chinese envoy to the Six-Party talks, Xu Bu complained that "the United States has recently bolstered its military alliance with South Korea and Japan, based on the nuclear crisis of North Korea" and "has also strengthened its military presence in Northeast Asia by pushing to deploy its missile-defense system in the region." Xu argued that these measures and international sanctions will not help to solve the North Korean nuclear problem.³⁸

Chinese leaders are convinced that concern for North Korea is a convenient excuse to deploy a BMD system that is really focused on China. Upsetting China is problematic since it is South Korea's largest trading partner and a huge engine for ROK economic growth. Debate continues in South Korea,³⁹ but the government remains committed to building its own, separate BMD system, (Korea Air and Missile Defense (KAMD)) along with a "Kill Chain" that provides the capability to launch conventional, preemptive strikes on North Korean nuclear and missile targets.

The difficulty for ROK officials is that U.S. deployment of THAAD to the peninsula, though not a ROK system, could be perceived as an incremental step to South Korea joining the U.S. regional BMD architecture. Seoul has indicated it would allow "further interoperability" but is determined to maintain a separate BMD system under KAMD. Indeed, former USFK commander B.B. Bell has argued that while he favors sending a THAAD battery to South Korea, he strongly opposes U.S. pressure on South Korea and "while I believe that most senior Korean security professionals understand the need for and desire deployment of THAAD, we must recognize that this is a complex issue for the South Korean public. We need to give them some breathing room."⁴⁰ In November 2014, the U.S. Defense Security Cooperation Agency announced that the State Department approved the sale of 136 PAC-3 missile interceptors valued at \$1.405 billion. The sale to an important ally "will increase interoperability between the ROK's ground and sea-based (Aegis) BMD forces and U.S. Forces Korea (USFK), which not only affects ROK national security but also the security of the U.S. personnel assigned in the ROK."⁴¹ Currently, South Korea uses 300 PAC-2 missiles, weapons that use fragmentation warheads and are designed largely to counter aircraft as well as being somewhat capable against short-range ballistic missiles.⁴² PAC-3s are more capable, designed for all weather operations with on-board radar and guidance systems, along with "hit-to-kill" technology that can target ballistic and cruise missiles along with aircraft.⁴³

POSTPONING THE TRANSITION OF WARTIME OPERATIONAL CONTROL (OPCON)

North Korean behavior was also the primary motivation for postponing the transfer of wartime OPCON. The OPCON issue has a long history. When the Korean War began, ROK troops were placed under the OPCON of the United Nations Command. After the fighting ended, OPCON shifted to the U.S. military command in South Korea. President Park Chung-hee eventually raised the OPCON issue in 1968, but the existing command arrangements remained.

In 1978, Seoul and Washington formed the Combined Forces Command (CFC) that allowed South Korea greater participation in command decisions. The CFC is divided into 14 sections with the United States holding the top position of "chief" in eight, including the commander-in-chief. South Korea held the lead position in the remaining six sections. The result was a highly integrated command structure, and U.S. dominance of the CFC helped to reinforce the credibility of the U.S. defense commitment to South Korea.⁴⁴ President Roh Tae-woo began discussions in 1990 to change the command relationship, and in 1994 the United States returned peacetime OPCON, giving day-to-day operations during normal armistice conditions to the ranking ROK commander. However, OPCON during wartime remained in the hands of the U.S. commander.

In 2002, Washington and Seoul began another round of talks on OPCON transfer, and the measure was pushed with great enthusiasm after the election of progressive President Roh Moo-hyun. After two years of talks, both sides agreed on the change with the transfer date set for April 17, 2012. Roh argued that the ROK position on OPCON was a matter of sovereignty and “self-reliant national defense,”⁴⁵ but critics believed it was an ill-advised move that weakened the alliance and unnecessarily jeopardized South Korean security.⁴⁶ Despite fierce debate, the plan moved forward.

Following North Korea’s second nuclear test in 2009, the sinking of the *Cheonan* in March 2010, and several missile tests during those years, calls for postponing the OPCON transfer increased. Moreover, April 17 was symbolically a very bad day to complete the transfer, falling as it did close to the 100th anniversary of Kim Il-sung’s birthday on April 15 and the likely celebration accompanying the commemoration. In March 2010 in testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee, USFK Commander Walter “Skip” Sharp provided a telling comment. After insisting that OPCON transfer was the right thing to do and expressing his confidence for South Korea assuming the lead, he mused that “if the Republic of Korea comes and asks for a delay, I’m sure that will be a discussion at the highest levels of both governments, because both governments agreed to this—this timeline of 17 April 2012,” a sign that reconsideration of the OPCON transfer was already underway.⁴⁷ As the debate intensified, on June 26, 2010, at the G20 summit in Toronto, presidents Lee and Obama announced that the OPCON transfer would be postponed to December 2015. Obama noted that an extension provides “appropriate time—within the existing security context—to do this right because this alliance is the lynchpin of not only security for the Republic of Korea and the United States but also for the Pacific as a whole.”⁴⁸

OPCON transfer, now renamed Strategic Alliance 2015, appeared to be proceeding to completion. In May 2013, President Park visited Washington and during their joint press conference, Obama maintained that, “we are on track for South Korea to assume operational control for the alliance in 2015.”⁴⁹ Park’s comments, however, were more measured, noting we “shared the view that in this respect, the transition of wartime operational control should also proceed in a way that strengthens our combined defense capabilities and preparations being made toward that way as well.”⁵⁰ Yet, sometime in early May 2013, the Ministry of National Defense (MND) approached the Park administration with a proposal to postpone OPCON transfer once again. Park’s conditional comments on the transfer may have been an indication that Seoul was already reconsidering its position. One month later at the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore, ROK officials are reported to have first broached the subject with the United States.⁵¹ Dialogue continued over the course of the next year, mostly away from the public eye. Then, in April 2014, Obama visited South Korea and at a press conference remarked “President Park recommended, and I agreed, that given the evolving security environment in the region, including the enduring North Korea nuclear and missile threat, we can reconsider the 2015 timeline for transferring operational control for our alliance.”⁵² This confirmed the rumors that postponing OPCON transfer was back on the table.

The final decision was announced in October 2014 following the annual SCM. Transferring OPCON would shift to a “conditions-based approach” at an appropriate time “when critical ROK and Alliance military capabilities are secured and the security environment on the Korean Peninsula and in the region is conducive to a stable OPCON transition.”⁵³ In the

press conference that followed the meeting, Hagel noted that the delay “will ensure that when the transfer does occur, Korean forces have the necessary defensive capabilities to address an intensifying North Korean threat.”⁵⁴ ROK Defense Minister Koo added, “considering the heightened nuclear – nuclear missile threat and the fluid security situation on the Peninsula and in the region, this would ensure a stable OPCON transition that enhances the alliance’s response capabilities, in addition to strengthening a combined defense force led by the Republic of Korea.”⁵⁵ He went on to indicate that Seoul will begin the conditions-based assessment in 2018 with mid-2020 as the target date to acquire the necessary military capabilities to reconsider OPCON transfer.⁵⁶

REFINING COMBAT CAPABILITIES

In addition to efforts to enhance deterrence, the United States has undertaken measures to improve its combat capabilities should deterrence fail. One of the most challenging threats is North Korea’s ability to launch a barrage of artillery shells and rockets on Seoul. The counter-battery mission designed to neutralize these systems is central to any defense of the capital. As part of the Land Partnership Plan (LPP), the United States is in the process of returning close to 60 U.S. bases back to South Korea. The vast majority of U.S. forces are set to be based south of Seoul in two hubs—Camp Humphreys/Osan Air Base around Pyeongtaek in the northwest and the Daegu/Chinhae hub to the southeast. Due to the concern for North Korea’s long-range artillery and rockets, U.S. and ROK officials agreed to keep the 210th Fires Brigade of the U.S. Army in its current position in Dongducheon, north of Seoul. USFK had made this request several times in 2014 during Korea-U.S. Integrated Defense Dialogue (KIDD) meetings, arguing that moving the brigade south would hurt combat readiness.⁵⁷ Camp Humphreys is simply too far away to counter North Korean artillery, and it would take too long to move these assets north should they be needed on short notice. During the 2014 SCM, U.S. and ROK officials announced that they had agreed to keep the U.S. unit in place until South Korea’s counter-battery units completed their improvements at which time the 210th would move to Camp Humphreys. Local residents who were expecting to receive the vacated land in Dongducheon were not happy with the decision and demanded compensation for the change in the Land Partnership Plan (LPP).⁵⁸ In a related agreement, U.S. and ROK officials decided to leave CFC headquarters in its present location in Yongsan, a large military base in central Seoul. As part of the Yongsan Relocation Plan (YRP), USFK was expected to return the base to Korean authorities. The Yongsan base occupies valuable real estate in Seoul that ROK authorities were very anxious to see returned.

Finally, in September 2014, ROK MND officials announced that the allies would be forming a joint division sometime in 2015. During a press briefing in November 2013, General Scaparrotti had indicated that a combined division was under consideration, and that it was a “strong possibility” and a “strong additive to our alliance.”⁵⁹ A ROK MND statement noted: “The aim of the Combined Division is to enhance the combined defense of the ROK (Republic of Korea) and readiness of the Alliance...the initiative is designed to enhance Alliance capabilities for the defense of the ROK.”⁶⁰ Though details remain to be worked out, the division will have its headquarters in Uijeongbu with a U.S. two-star general in command and a ROK one-star serving as the deputy commander. Once the facilities at Camp Humphreys are completed, possibly in 2017, the division would move to this new location.

U.S. and ROK troops in the combined division would remain separate during peacetime and train as needed but would come together during wartime to conduct joint operations such as civil affairs missions or securing North Korea's nuclear weapons assets. The size and make-up of the division are uncertain but will include an equal number of personnel with both sides contributing brigade-sized units.

REVITALIZING THE UNITED NATIONS COMMAND (UNC)

The U.S. four-star Army general in Korea wears three command “hats” leading USFK, and UNC along with CFC during wartime. The role of commander of the UNC is often the least recognized of these positions yet is important as the custodian of the armistice agreement. After North Korea invaded in 1950, the United Nations created the UNC, consisting of 16 UN member states, to coordinate the responses of nations that came to the defense of South Korea.⁶¹ Representatives of these countries continue to hold regular meetings to maintain the armistice and address all matters under UNC responsibility to ensure security on the peninsula.

Partly in response to North Korean provocations, USFK has begun to revitalize the UNC and increase the involvement of member states, which helps to constrain North Korea's diplomatic space, making this more of an international issue than a dispute solely with South Korea and the United States. UNC members have increased their contributions to military exercises over the past years to include, for example, participation by Australia, Canada, Denmark, and the United Kingdom in KR 2014. When naval vessels from UNC members travel close to the peninsula, they often join U.S.-ROK exercises and operate under the UN flag.⁶²

INCREASING ROK-JAPAN-U.S. COOPERATION

Washington has long sought to increase trilateral cooperation with its two most important allies in Asia. Their militaries have been able to cooperate to a certain degree and conduct periodic naval exercises, e.g., in July 2014, the three navies conducted a search and rescue exercise off the South Korea island of Jeju.⁶³ Yet, high-level trilateral cooperation has remained elusive due to ongoing legacies of history and the dispute over islands the Koreans call Dokdo and the Japanese, Takeshima. In June 2012, Seoul and Tokyo were close to signing an intelligence sharing agreement, the General Security of Military Information Agreement or GSOMIA, particularly for sharing information concerning North Korea. Japan has strengths in signals intelligence while South Korea has better human intelligence resources. The United States pushed very hard to have its two allies come together on an agreement of this sort, but the politics were not handled well in South Korea and the pending agreement provoked a firestorm of opposition. Literally, minutes before officials were expected to sign the accord, South Korea pulled out of the deal.

In April 2014, the possibility of a joint information sharing agreement surfaced again when the ROK government indicated it was willing to consider such an arrangement. Japan had continued to express an interest, and South Korea's willingness was the remaining variable. Several trilateral meetings followed including Defense Trilateral Talks later in April and another meeting in May on the sidelines of the Shangri-La Dialogue. The United States continued to push hard, and its persistence in facilitating a deal eventually paid off.

On December 29, 2014, Japan and South Korea joined the United States in a three-way intelligence sharing agreement confined to sharing information only on the DPRK's nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programs and not any China-related intelligence. Seoul was insistent on this restriction so as not to provoke the ire of Beijing. The pact has a relatively small impact on intelligence sharing but is an important first step in advancing trilateral cooperation. Without U.S. efforts, it is likely the deal would not have been concluded.⁶⁴

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

ROK and U.S. defense planners face some difficult challenges in Korea in the years ahead, particularly regarding North Korea's ballistic missile and nuclear weapons programs. Though North Korea has conducted three nuclear tests and continues work on its ballistic missiles, there remain several significant challenges it must overcome to field an effective reliable nuclear deterrent. First, North Korea must be able to miniaturize a nuclear weapon so that it can fit on top of a ballistic missile. Pyongyang has yet to conduct a test that demonstrates this capability or provide other definitive evidence, but the weight of many analysts and government assessments is beginning to tip further to the conclusion that North Korea has mastered this technology.⁶⁵ The evidence may not be conclusive, but it is only a matter of time before North Korea is able to successfully equip one of its short- or medium-range missiles with a nuclear weapon.

Regarding ballistic missiles, though North Korea has hundreds of short- and medium-range missiles that can target South Korea and Japan, it has yet to demonstrate the capability of an intercontinental ballistic missile that can reach the United States.⁶⁶ Pyongyang's most recent effort in December 2012 was far more successful than the April 2012 launch that blew up shortly after takeoff. North Korea has argued these launches were permissible as part of its space program. However, space launch vehicles use the same technology as ballistic missiles and have been banned in UN Security Council resolutions that followed previous North Korea nuclear weapons tests. Despite these setbacks, North Korea continues work on its long-range ballistic missiles, particularly the long-range Taepodong missile that was used in the 2012 launches and the KN-08. Indeed, recently Admiral William Gortney, commander of NORAD and U.S. Northern Command maintained that "our assessment is they have the ability to put a nuclear weapon on a KN-08 and shoot it at the homeland."⁶⁷ However, the DPRK will need to master numerous scientific and engineering challenges including correct burn for multi-stage rockets, proper interface of propulsion, guidance, and weapons systems, a long-range re-entry vehicle that can survive the bruising intercontinental flight, and a warhead that will actually detonate where and when intended.⁶⁸ These are serious challenges for North Korea to overcome, but it will continue trying and will likely someday succeed in developing a ballistic missile that can reach the continental U.S. with a nuclear weapon.⁶⁹

In the Middle East, similar progress by Iran on nuclear weapons could provoke a military strike by Israel to take out Tehran's nuclear facilities. North Korea has already passed beyond the red lines Israel set for Iran but there have been no indications of ROK or U.S. intent to launch a military strike to take out the North's facilities. South Korea is preparing its "Kill Chain" that could conduct conventional strikes on North Korean targets should an attack appear imminent, and the United States certainly has this capability, but military action is unlikely given the dangers of escalation and Seoul's vulnerability to North Korean artillery and rockets.

For the United States, North Korea's possession of a long-range ballistic missile tipped with a nuclear warhead will be a serious change in the overall security environment. For years, Pyongyang has threatened nuclear retaliation on the U.S. homeland but planners knew North Korea lacked this capability. In the years ahead, it is likely that North Korea will overcome most of the obstacles to reach the United States with a nuclear tipped ballistic missile. The U.S. response to this eventuality is likely to be three-fold. First, the United States will continue work on improving its BMD capabilities, especially the development of a regional system in East Asia. Though the capabilities of BMD remain limited, the dangers of the DPRK's long-range missiles will prompt further emphasis and spending in this area. Second, Washington will respond to growing South Korean anxiety through continued declarations of the U.S. nuclear umbrella. These assurances will include the regular statements contained in the SCM that South Korea remains under the U.S. nuclear umbrella to occasional efforts to demonstrate this capability such as the spring 2013 fly-over of a B-52 and B-2 bombers during the KR/FE Exercises, a high profile demonstration of U.S. nuclear capabilities. While these actions are intended to reassure South Korea of the U.S. defense commitment, they are also an important part of U.S. non-proliferation policy to convince Seoul to refrain from acquiring its own nuclear weapons.

Finally, the United States in collaboration with South Korea will explore further refinements of their deterrence strategy, at both the strategic and tactical levels. Given the stakes for South Korea, in large part due to the proximity of Seoul to the DMZ, deterring a conflict is the primary goal of the U.S.-ROK alliance. When North Korea possesses a long-range nuclear capability, deterrence will become more complicated for the United States since any action it takes against Pyongyang now risks retaliation against the United States. Yet, any operation North Korea might conduct also risks escalation, including to nuclear weapons that would be tantamount to regime suicide. In the end, Washington is likely to continue its efforts to halt Pyongyang's proliferation activities, continue development of ballistic missile defense, and buttress deterrence against strategic and lower level provocations to demonstrate its resolve to defend South Korea.

CONCLUSION

As North Korea's nuclear weapons capability grows, security in Korea will become more complicated. Future crises will be made more difficult by DPRK nuclear weapons, the dangers of escalation, and greater potential difficulties with crisis stability.⁷⁰ Moreover, the dynamics of a stability/instability condition raises the possibility of increased North Korean provocative behavior knowing it now has the ultimate deterrent. However, it is also plausible to argue that nuclear weapons may prod Pyongyang to be more risk averse since a conventional conflict or even simply a crisis with elevated tension levels could prompt Seoul or Washington to conduct a preemptive strike on North Korean nuclear weapon capabilities or raise the dangers of escalation to nuclear weapons. North Korean leaders might still believe they can continue their provocative behavior certain they can control the escalation ladder. Yet with nuclear weapons, the stakes are much higher for Pyongyang and may produce greater restraint.

In the end, it is uncertain how North Korea or others will act in this new strategic environment of a DPRK with a modest, reliable, and survivable nuclear deterrent. For Washington, most

of its efforts are likely to focus on bolstering deterrence at both the strategic and tactical levels. Working with South Korea and coordinating through the alliance, the U.S. military will continue to buttress the deterrence posture of the alliance. Economic sanctions will remain, but military strikes against North Korea's nuclear program are dangerous and unlikely. Deterrence remains largely the only viable option. However, the United States will also need to craft a policy that continues insistence on the goal of denuclearization while not making that a precondition so as to allow for some level of dialogue that begins to lower regional tensions and, hopefully, moderates North Korean behavior. Dialogue need not mean Washington abandons its goals and principles, but it can be a starting point to address the plethora of issues that impede better relations in Northeast Asia. Security is an important starting point, but there must also be openings for diplomacy and dialogue.

ENDNOTES

The views expressed in this report are the author's alone and do not represent the official position of the Department of the Navy, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. government.

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