

ROK-U.S. EXERCISES AND DENUCLEARIZING NORTH KOREA: DIPLOMACY OR READINESS?

By Terence Roehrig

ABSTRACT

In the press conference that followed the Singapore summit in June 2018, President Trump announced that he would stop the “war games” since they were costly and provocative. Subsequent large-scale ROK-U.S. combined exercises were suspended or down-sized, but military training in Korea continued. Critics responded that these actions would damage military readiness and do little to encourage Pyongyang to denuclearize. Proponents of the change responded that this was a worthwhile gesture to reduce North Korean security concerns and would help create space for the diplomatic process to advance. This paper examines two fundamental questions. What impact did the altered exercise schedule have on military readiness in Korea? Was the associated risk worth the possible gain to support diplomacy? Though significant debate remains, the short-term risk to readiness was acceptable as both militaries continued to train, tension levels had decreased in 2018, and there was little likelihood that North Korea would challenge the alliance. The more controversial element was the role of military exercises as a bargaining tool and whether the changes were essential to support diplomacy or instead were a mistake that lessened the pressure on North Korea. Military readiness has a shelf-life, but it can be maintained in multiple ways and must be balanced against the overall security environment and the potential for diplomacy.

Key Words: *military exercises; diplomacy; North Korea; South Korea; U.S. Forces Korea*

INTRODUCTION¹

During the follow-on press conference to the historic U.S.-North Korea summit meeting in June 2018 in Singapore, President Trump announced that: “We will stop the war games which will save us a tremendous amount of money. Unless and until we see the future negotiations is not going along like it should. We will be saving a tremendous amount of money. Plus, it is very provocative.”² The announcement caught everyone off-guard, including the Pentagon, but most importantly officials in the Republic of Korea (ROK or South Korea).³ Trump framed the decision, in part, as a cost-saving measure and labeled exercises “provocative,” a descriptor that is typically used by North Korea. The exercises had now become part of denuclearization negotiations.

At its core, the ROK-U.S. relationship is a military alliance. Though it has grown into a broader set of political and economic ties, the U.S. commitment to defend South Korea is central to the relationship. Ensuring an effective and robust military alliance requires strategic and operational planning along with a demonstrated ability to conduct combined combat operations.⁴ These capabilities do not come automatically and require practice to perfect operational and tactical skills and to identify areas where planning and execution may be deficient. Accomplishing these goals requires regular exercises to ensure the alliance partners can act together to meet the common security challenges. Exercises also send signals of alliance capability and a demonstration of the U.S. commitment that deters

Terence Roehrig is a Professor of National Security Affairs and Director of the Asia-Pacific Studies Group at the U.S. Naval War College. 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 US government. This paper is the hundred-and-thirteenth in KEI's Academic Paper Series. As part of this program, KEI commissions and distributes up to ten papers per year on original subjects of current interest to over 5,000 Korea watchers, government officials, think tank experts, and scholars around the United States and the world. At the end of the year, these papers are compiled and published in KEI's On Korea volume. For more information, please visit www.keia.org/aps_on_korea.

North Korea while reassuring the South. Over the years, ROK and U.S. forces have conducted a wide range of joint exercises to fulfill all of these goals.⁵

In 2018, military exercises became a part of the diplomatic effort to achieve the denuclearization of North Korea. Pyongyang has long protested ROK-U.S. exercises and called for their elimination, arguing they were rehearsals for an invasion. Following Trump's announcement in Singapore, the United States and South Korea suspended some exercises and reconfigured others as a concession to Pyongyang to support diplomacy. While proponents argued this was a worthwhile gesture to reduce North Korean security concerns and maintain momentum in the denuclearization process, critics contended these changes to the exercise regime would undercut military readiness and do little to encourage North Korean flexibility.⁶ The fundamental question here was whether any loss of readiness and the associated risk was worth the possible gain in coaxing Pyongyang to surrender its nuclear weapons. As one US Navy Captain who served on the Commander, U.S. Naval Forces Korea (CNFK) staff phrased it: "It all comes down to risk – what is acceptable and manageable for diplomacy?"⁷

There is little doubt that reconfiguring the exercises decreased readiness but how much was lost and was the risk tolerable? In the short-term, the risk was acceptable given the reduced tensions of 2018 and the low likelihood that North Korea would challenge the ROK-U.S. alliance in any significant way. The larger issue was the role of military exercises as a bargaining tool and whether the changes were essential to support diplomacy or instead were a mistake that lessened the pressure on North Korea to relinquish its nuclear weapons. Diplomacy and military strength often go hand-in-hand as mutually supporting tools to achieve national goals. The short-term risks to military readiness were tolerable to support diplomacy and it was worth the effort to try, even if the chance of success was low. Military readiness has a shelf-life, but it can be maintained in the short-term in multiple ways. However, in the years ahead, it will be necessary to reassess whether the security environment and the potential for diplomatic success remain conducive to an altered exercise schedule.

ROK-U.S. MILITARY EXERCISES

Since the beginning of the alliance, the U.S. and South Korea have conducted regular exercises to ensure their ability to conduct independent and combined military

operations. The exercise schedule in Korea includes many different types. Exercises may differ in size with some small-scale, unit-level events that involve personnel who fulfill specific functions such as an infantry battalion or a fighter wing. Others are integrated exercises that combine units that need to work together to accomplish a common task, or are large-scale, combined exercises that practice elements of the Operations Plan (OPLAN).

Exercises may also take different forms, and have been known by different names over the years. Command Post Exercises (CPX) provide training for high-level staff functions through computer-simulated events that work through multiple scenarios to ensure the smooth conduct of various capabilities, including logistics, communications, intelligence-sharing, and operations.⁸ For example, combat operations in Korea would require use of the road network which ROK authorities control. A basic skill exercised by a CPX is coordinating and synchronizing the use of ROK roads to move U.S. and South Korean forces forward.⁹ In contrast, Field Training Exercises (FTX) entail military units conducting simulated combat operations where forces in the field practice elements of military plans. The emphasis of the FTXs in Korea often shift as a result of current circumstances in the security environment. Finally, military personnel and strategists also conduct wargames or Table Top Exercises (TTX) that simulate combat operations and provide the opportunity to discuss, deliberate and revise plans and strategy.

For the past decade, the exercises have had a rhythm that included a variety of events throughout the year. Each fall, the ROK and U.S. militaries have held a large combined CPX. In 2017, this exercise called Ulchi Freedom Guardian (UFG), involved close to 13,000 U.S. personnel and 10,000 from the ROK military. Concurrently, South Korea holds its Ulchi Exercise which is a national civil defense drill.

Each spring, ROK and U.S. forces have conducted two large combined exercises. In 2017, these events were called Key Resolve and Foal Eagle. Key Resolve is a CPX that involved over 12,000 U.S. and 10,000 ROK personnel. Occurring almost simultaneously is the Foal Eagle FTX that involved over 5,000 U.S. troops and 300,000 ROK personnel. Spring exercises also included a combined Air Force exercise. Named Max Thunder in 2017, ROK and U.S. Air Forces conduct combined training to improve tactical skills and interoperability. In December, ROK and U.S. pilots conducted another combined air exercise previously called

Vigilant Ace. During times of heightened tensions, the air exercises have been an occasion to bring in the most advanced aircraft in the U.S. Air Force, including strategic assets such as the F-22, F-35, B-1B, B-2, and B-52.

PURPOSE OF MILITARY EXERCISES

The central role of the ROK-U.S. alliance is to provide an extended deterrence commitment for the defense of South Korea.¹⁰ Ensuring that commitment requires U.S. and ROK forces to train independently and as a combined force. For the benefit of individuals and the larger units they make up, militaries must conduct regular exercises to develop and maintain the skills necessary for the efficient and successful use of their capabilities.

The purposes of military exercises are three-fold. First, forces must be ready to conduct effective combat operations. Given the proximity of the adversary and the memories of the surprise attack that began the Korean War, ROK-U.S. forces have long followed a simple mantra of being able to “fight tonight”; military forces have to be prepared to conduct combat operations on short notice, a competency that requires training and exercising. If combat begins, events will move quickly, and personnel must be able to conduct operations from “muscle memory” rather than relying on a checklist. Exercises help ensure prompt reactions.¹¹

Readiness in the Korean theater has several particular challenges. Most U.S. military personnel assigned to Korea are there for one-year tours, producing a constant rotation and subsequent dearth of experience that requires a steep learning curve. U.S. personnel spend their first six months becoming acclimated and proficient in their duties with only six remaining months before they rotate out. In addition, reservists who support U.S. operations often spend only a few weeks in Korea and many arrive with little experience in and knowledge of the region.¹² ROK personnel are also rotating on a regular basis creating a matrix of shifting personnel who are learning new assignments and working with new people. The need to exercise in this environment to ensure proficiency and interoperability is paramount and requires repetition.

Another set of challenges to readiness in Korea are the difficulties of alliance partners who have a different culture and speak different languages, and for U.S. forces, are operating on unfamiliar terrain. Exercises are crucial for building mutual trust and confidence; both sides need to

understand how each other thinks and operates, and they do this by working together.¹³

Combined operations as a goal with such high stakes often hinge on personal relationships that grow over time. An Army colonel with extensive experience in Korea noted there is great benefit to “the experience gained through the interaction with an ally with whom you will fight, and nothing forms bonds like shared misery and the shared misery of living in wartime headquarters certainly makes solid teams.”¹⁴ Combined training and exercises help to build relationships, common understanding, and trust that will be essential during wartime operations.

Second, maintaining readiness and the ability to be an effective fighting force has another equally important purpose. War in Korea would be a disaster, and estimates of casualties and destruction should hostilities begin are horrific. As a result, deterring military action in the first place is the most important goal of the ROK-U.S. alliance. Exercises play an important role in supporting a robust deterrence posture by maintaining military skills that demonstrate to North Korea the effectiveness of the alliance along with the folly of challenging its combined strength. In addition to demonstrating military capability, exercises also show alliance solidarity and commitment that provide further evidence of the combined response that a North Korean attack would face.

Third, exercises provide an important signal to South Korea and other allies in the region. The inherent challenge of an extended deterrence commitment is demonstrating the credibility of that security guarantee to both ally and adversary. Exercises help to demonstrate the credibility of the commitment and reassures South Korea that the security guarantee will be fulfilled should deterrence fail. Japan is also an important recipient of this signal that helps demonstrate the U.S. commitment to both alliances and to East Asian security writ large.

THE TRUMP ADMINISTRATION: EXERCISES AND DENUCLEARIZATION EFFORTS

The story of altering the exercises begins at the start of 2018. After the escalating tensions and increasing danger of military conflict throughout 2016 and 2017, on January 1, 2018, Kim Jong-un offered an olive branch in his annual address, providing the opening President Moon had been waiting for to move on his engagement strategy. A few

days later, Moon and Trump spoke by telephone to discuss this turn of events and agreed that while the pressure should remain on North Korea, to facilitate “a safe and successful” upcoming Winter Olympics and Paralympic Games in Pyeongchang, the annual Key Resolve and Foal Eagle exercises that were to commence in March would be postponed.¹⁵ The decision was partly political, to capitalize on Kim’s willingness to lower tension levels, and practical, since the security and logistics demands of hosting the games would be a challenge, even without conducting military exercises simultaneously.

During the Olympics, North Korea sent athletes and a delegation led by Kim Yo-jong, Kim Jong-un’s sister. These representatives met with Moon during their three-day visit and delivered an invitation from Kim Jong-un for Moon to visit Pyongyang. Dialogue continued in early March when a South Korean delegation led by National Security advisor Chung Eui-yong and head of National Intelligence Suh Hoon met with Kim Jong-un in Pyongyang.

Soon after, Chung and Suh traveled to Washington to brief the Trump Administration on their meeting. Not long after speaking with Trump on March 8th, Chung appeared in front of the White House with a surprise announcement that Trump had accepted Kim Jong-un’s invitation for a summit.¹⁶ Chung also reported that Kim acknowledged the “routine joint military exercises between the Republic of Korea and the United States must continue,”¹⁷ a comment that challenges the veracity of North Korean complaints concerning the exercises. The day after the Paralympics wrapped up, Seoul and Washington announced that exercises would begin on April 1 and “at a scale similar to that of the previous years.”¹⁸

While these events were playing out, the U.S. Forces Korea (USFK) Commander, U.S. Army General Vincent K. Brooks, was already developing a framework for the exercises that would support a tailored approach.¹⁹ When conducting exercises, General Brooks identified four elements or “dials” that could be adjusted, much like a rheostat, to turn up or down the role and intensity of a particular element of an exercise. These dials included: scope; scale; timing; and communication volume. Scope denotes the types of operations to be exercised, such as amphibious assault or non-combatant evacuation operations, while scale refers to the size of the exercise, especially the number of personnel involved. Timing takes into account when an exercise is conducted, so that it could occur in direct response, or be

delayed as a result of North Korean actions. Finally, the volume in communicating the other three dials prior to or during the exercise can be adjusted to enhance or tone down the messaging of the exercise to North Korea. The volume can be adjusted to lessen the messaging effect without changing the scope, scale, and timing with no impact on readiness.

For Key Resolve/Foal Eagle 2018, the scope and scale remained similar to previous years as the troop levels and plans to be exercised were largely the same. However, the timing was adjusted by delaying the exercises and cutting the duration of each—Key Resolve was shortened from four weeks to two, and Foal Eagle from two months to one. Perhaps most important, the communication volume was turned off to avoid provoking North Korean ire. These adjustments were intended to maintain military readiness while presenting a less hostile and confrontational face on the exercise so as not to disrupt momentum for dialogue.²⁰ In November 2018, General Robert Abrams replaced General Brooks as USFK Commander, and maintained the 4-dials construct. General Abrams noted: “Adjustments to these dials allows exercise design to remain in tune with diplomatic and political requirements without sacrificing the training of essential tasks. Additionally, such fine tuning allows for the mitigation of impacts inherent to rapidly switching from our traditional large-scale exercise program to one of the more targeted events.”²¹

The next round of major exercises on the schedule was the combined air exercise, Max Thunder, set to start in mid-May, taking place only a few weeks after the April Moon-Kim summit. U.S. and ROK officials and military leaders faced another decision—should the air exercises be altered to promote dialogue with the North, or was it premature to adjust the event? The U.S. and South Korea opted to change the scope of the exercise to not focus on North Korea, retained the scale and timing from previous years, but lowered the volume to lessen attention to the exercise and the coverage it would generate in the ROK media.²² The exercise was also renamed a Combined Flying Training Event 18 (CFTE), the generic label that would be used for subsequent large-scale ROK-U.S. air exercises and Air Force personnel were prohibited from using the Max Thunder name.²³ Despite ROK-U.S. efforts to keep publicity quiet, word leaked out and two days after the start of the exercise, the Korean Central News Agency published a scathing rebuke.²⁴

With much anticipation, Kim and Trump met in Singapore on June 12, 2018. The summit produced striking pictures and a broadly worded document that was short on details. Assessments of the results ranged from a success with the start of dialogue to a disaster, since Kim meeting with Trump was a huge concession that resulted in little actual progress toward denuclearization. One of the most surprising elements of the summit came in Trump's press conference where he announced an end to the ROK-U.S. "war games" that were provocative and costly, a decision that caught everyone by surprise.

Following the Singapore summit, the exercise schedule began to change. General Brooks had been developing a tailored plan for exercises with a calibrated use of the four dials, but these efforts were upended by the Singapore announcement. Moreover, South Korea had taken a significant risk going through with CFTE 18 at the urging of the United States and the sudden reversal on exercises undercut alliance solidarity.²⁵ South Korea cancelled its June *Taeguk* CPX and moved it to October. ROK and U.S. officials announced suspension of the fall combined CPX UFG, and South Korea suspended its Ulchi civil defense exercise. In place of UFG, USFK conducted a series of training seminars and four smaller CPX events; General Brooks noted the repetition was good but not the same as conducting a large CPX.²⁶ The U.S. and ROK Marines also cancelled the Korean Marine Exchange Program (KMEP) that conducts over a dozen small-scale drills annually between the III Marine Expeditionary Force and ROK Marines.²⁷ The ROK *Hoguk* FTX took place in October as scheduled.

In August, Secretary of Defense James Mattis had announced that the Pentagon had "no plans at this time to suspend any more exercises."²⁸ Yet, in October 2018, Mattis and ROK Minister of National Defense Jeong Kyeong-doo announced the decision to suspend the combined air exercise *Vigilant Ace* to support ongoing denuclearization diplomacy. Pentagon Spokesperson Dana White noted that the decision was made "to give the diplomatic process every opportunity to continue,"²⁹ but that "both ministers are committed to modifying training exercises to ensure the readiness of our forces."³⁰ The U.S. and ROK Air Forces conducted a different version of the exercise calling it Combined Flying Training Event.

On March 3, 2019, a few days after the failed summit in Hanoi, Seoul and Washington announced another round

of changes to the spring exercises. The previous training events, *Key Resolve* and *Foal Eagle*, were replaced by a new exercise named *Dong Maeng*—Korean for alliance. *Dong Maeng* replaced the *Key Resolve* CPX but at a slightly reduced scale and ended the *Foal Eagle* FTX to be replaced by a series of smaller exercises at the battalion level or lower. The CFTE, formerly *Max Thunder*, was also scrapped and divided into smaller-scale and more frequent training events.

After the announcement, President Trump tweeted: "The reason I do not want military drills with South Korea is to save hundreds of millions of dollars for the US for which we are not reimbursed. ...Also, reducing tensions with North Korea at this time is a good thing."³¹ The tweet was a reminder of U.S. efforts to have South Korea increase its share of alliance costs. South Korea followed by combining and scaling back its *Taeguk* CPX and the *Ulchi* civil defense drill. All these exercises were adjusted despite a lack of evidence that North Korea had moderated its winter training cycle.³²

In fall 2019, South Korea and the United States held *Dong Maeng-2*, a CPX that was a scaled back version of UFG. A key goal of the exercise was to help South Korea prepare for when it will take war-time operational control from the United States. In November 2019, U.S. officials announced that *Vigilant Ace* was suspended for the second year in a row. However, the Pentagon was adamant that "there are no plans to skip upcoming combined exercises. We are proceeding with Combined Flying Training Event as planned."³³

The current round of exercises scheduled for spring 2020 were postponed again, but this time in response to COVID-19. ROK and U.S. forces have also curtailed unilateral training to stem the spread of the virus. When announcing these measures, a U.S. spokesperson said: "Despite the postponement of combined training, the ROK-U.S. alliance remains committed to providing a credible military deterrence and maintaining a robust combined defense posture to protect the ROK against any threat."³⁴ Another Pentagon official noted that: "I think our assessment at this point would be that we've not yet seen any dramatic reduction in readiness or ability of our forces based on COVID-19 [and] ... as the virus passes and we move into warmer weather, that we'll be able to resume some of those efforts."³⁵

EXERCISES AND DIPLOMACY: WERE THE CHANGES AN ACCEPTABLE RISK?

Damage to readiness

It is crucial to recognize that throughout the past two years, U.S. and ROK forces continued extensive training, unilaterally and in combined exercises, but in ways that were different from the past. Yet, there is no doubt that the altered exercises had a negative impact on readiness. This assessment is comprised of several issues. First, because of the one-year rotation of most U.S. forces and the assignment of less experienced reservists, along with the rotation of ROK personnel, there is a constant need for training to acclimate new people to unfamiliar duty stations. The need for training is also essential for the flag officers who are there for one to two years, resulting in a loss of corporate knowledge and best practices at the top. Exercises are important for all members of the force to pass on “lessons learned” to those who follow.³⁶

USFK and ROK forces have sought to compensate for the changed training routine by shortening and scaling back their exercises but increasing their frequency. General Abrams noted: “We continue to aggressively pursue innovative approaches to joint and combined training and are committed to demonstrating that creating space for diplomacy need not impede military readiness.”³⁷ Unit level training continued, and U.S. and ROK forces maintained proficiency at this level, as well as some degree of combined-force operational skill that comes from U.S. and ROK units training together, but in smaller scale exercises. A U.S. Army colonel noted that the suspensions were largely for combined exercises and “just drove more unilateral training.” This change, according to the colonel, was actually advantageous to have fewer large-scale exercises but more frequent lower level training based on the benefits of repetition. However, he also acknowledged that there was still a need for large scale exercises, but fewer could be sufficient.³⁸ In November 2018, in comments to reporters, a Pentagon spokesperson noted “the exercises in Korea...have been ongoing...to ensure readiness. They’ve never stopped. The ROK-U.S. alliance has maintained its responsibility to fight tonight and ensure that it has the right readiness level to be able to respond.”³⁹ In addition, though command-level exercises have been suspended, “that does not negate the fact that at the unit level, these exercises are taking place. And even at the higher staff level we’ve taken certain measures to make sure that proficiency is maintained.”⁴⁰

The trade-off is a reduced ability to plan, coordinate, and conduct large-scale operations which can degrade the interoperability and effectiveness of ROK-U.S. forces. When confined to smaller exercises, military leaders are required to make assumptions regarding actions that can only be done in large exercises. Smaller events will not exercise all of the necessary missions, so that these skills have not actually been practiced should war break out. As a result, one Air Force flag officer noted, concerning the many elements of large-scale combat operations, you “don’t know until you fit all the parts together.”⁴¹ For Air Force units, continued low-level exercises maintained proficiency within the individual wings, but not at higher level combined operations. The most serious concern is “limited testing of U.S. and ROK forces in congested airspace on a large scale and limited testing of communication up and down the chain of command on secure systems.”⁴² Another U.S. Air Force officer phrased it thus: “smaller exercises can have positive tactical effects but the larger organization needs to be meshed to fight—it is difficult to do this at lower levels.”⁴³ To use a football analogy, a team can have excellent practices for various parts of the offense—the line, receivers, and running backs—but if these groups do not practice together as a unit, their success in a game is unlikely. As one officer put it, exercises are crucial for building connective tissue.⁴⁴

Another element of lost readiness is the relaxation of standards that comes with reduced training. Citing the concept of “normalization of deviance,” an Air Force general lamented that there can be an incremental relaxation of standards until the new standard that is inadequate is eventually considered normal. Once these standards for readiness are reduced to this level, the risk of failure increases, and it is difficult to return to previous levels of preparedness.⁴⁵

Messaging

Another important aspect of conducting exercises is signaling—the deterrence message it sends to North Korea and the reassurances it provides the South. There are two opposing arguments to consider regarding the messaging aspects. On one side, suspending and altering exercises was foolish from the start, since Pyongyang likely had no intention of giving up its nuclear weapons regardless of what Washington and Seoul did concerning exercises. Even if there was a chance, lessening the pressure generated by exercises was a bad decision; it was only through maintaining the pressure of continued exercises that denuclearization had a chance. Moreover, abruptly announcing a suspension

at Singapore without coordinating with ROK allies and using North Korea's language to criticize the exercises further undercut alliance unity and the reassurance exercises provide to South Korea and Japan.

The other side of the debate had a different logic regarding signaling. The 2018 summits had started a process that was unexpected, particularly after the two previous years of heightened tension. North Korea had long complained about the exercises as a demonstration of U.S. hostility and rehearsals for an invasion. For the denuclearization process to succeed, it was necessary to continue lowering tension levels, lessen North Korea's security concerns to reduce its need for nuclear weapons, and provide a gesture of good faith in the early stages of negotiations. In March 2017, Chinese officials had proposed a "double suspension" or what became known as "freeze-for-freeze" where North Korea would suspend its nuclear weapon and ballistic missile programs in return for a halt to ROK-U.S. combined exercises.⁴⁶ The Trump administration showed no interest in this proposal when it first surfaced, but Trump apparently changed his mind after meeting with Kim Jong-un in Singapore. Thus, suspending the exercises was an important action to jump start and support the diplomatic process that had begun.

Though the debate among analysts in the wake of altering the exercises often focused on military readiness, the underlying issue had more to do with the message that was sent to North Korea. Was the shift a necessary signal of ROK-U.S. willingness to improve relations or a ill-considered action that had no chance of contributing to denuclearization efforts? The answer to these questions centered more on one's view of the proper policy for dealing with North Korea than military readiness.

Diplomacy

Suspending and altering exercises occurred to support diplomacy. Was the effect on readiness and the risk it generated acceptable to support diplomacy? In hindsight, or from the perspective that this process was doomed from the outset, it is easy to argue that suspending the exercises was not worth the risk and provided no benefit. Critics maintain that since Singapore, North Korea has given little evidence of a willingness to pursue denuclearization and has not reciprocated by scaling back its own exercises.

Yet at the time, even if the prospects for success were low, the corresponding risk to readiness was also low and it was worth the effort. Tensions on the peninsula were lessening with the plethora of summits and the conclusion of the Comprehensive Military Agreement between North and South Korea.⁴⁷ In addition, the likelihood of North Korea starting major combat operations was very low, as it has been for several decades—which meant less short-term risk in altering the exercises. Lower level provocations are more likely and altering exercises for a short period of time will do little to decrease the ability of South Korea or the alliance to respond to these actions. Suspending and altering the exercises entailed a reasonable amount of risk to test whether the diplomatic process could move forward. I share the view of most skeptics that the chances of success have been small, but pursuing a diplomatic option is always worth the effort.

To be sure, the manner in which these changes were implemented left much to be desired. The abrupt decision to cancel exercises demonstrated no alliance coordination. Moreover, canceling exercises does not save money since the funding is reallocated within the Department of Defense, and is a relatively small sum regardless. With the exercises becoming a part of the diplomatic process, more could have been done to secure something in return from Pyongyang. Unilaterally suspending one or two exercises at the outset of negotiations was an appropriate gesture of good will, but as the months progressed, follow-on exercises could have been an item on the bargaining table. In the end, it's not clear how important exercises are to Kim Jong-un, especially when compared to sanctions relief.

CONCLUSION

Success in denuclearizing North Korea has been a longshot for some time, yet it has been a worthwhile effort. Altering the exercises in Korea has impacted readiness, but the associated risk has been acceptable to provide space for diplomacy. As one Air Force officer told me concerning the acceptance of short-term risk to military readiness, "if you believe diplomacy has a chance, then absolutely. The military supports the larger political objectives and interests of the country; if the military can help provide confidence-building measures to reach a political solution, then yes. Moreover, we need to support the ROK government as they are the bigger stakeholder."⁴⁸

The remaining question is how long can this altered exercise routine continue? General Brooks noted “it depends on the environment—if it is conducive to diplomacy, we can adjust and accept risk. If the environment is not conducive, we can change and return to our usual training schedule.”⁴⁹ The risk may be acceptable for a few years, but at what point does it become too great and any contribution to diplomacy becomes minimal? There is no precise answer to this question. Two to three years often surfaced in my interviews as the point after which the impact will be significant. Yet, depending on the security environment and any progress in diplomacy, the answer and timeline, along with the associated risk, may be different. The size and details of ROK-U.S. exercises have always been adjustable

based on the conditions at the time, and these changes do not necessarily jeopardize ROK security.

Deliberation over the wisdom of adjusting the exercises will continue, but it is important to remember that there is a military dimension to the debate, as well as a political one. While the risk to readiness is one issue, the efficacy of offering North Korea concessions concerning exercises is another. As events unfold over the next few years, decisions will need to be made on whether security conditions and the state of the diplomatic process warrant a reassessment of the current approach to ROK-U.S. military exercises in Korea.

ENDNOTES

¹ I want to thank General (ret) Vincent Brooks and the other officers from the U.S. Army, Air Force, and Navy who were graciously willing to share their time and expertise with me. However, any errors are solely my own.

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⁴ Following Defense Department lexicon, this paper will use “combined” when referring to ROK-U.S. exercises and cooperation and “joint” for actions taken by two or more military services, for example a joint Army and Air Force exercise.

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