



South Korea-United States Joint Military Exercise, 2016: The North Korean Dimension

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The biggest-ever military exercise between the Republic of Korea (South Korea) and the United States since 2010 is underway on South Korea's east coast from March 7-April 30, 2016. Named 'Key Resolve' and 'Foal Eagle', the joint exercise involves 17,000 American and 300,000 South Korean military personnel, comprises amphibious operations as well as the air and special operations services. According to the data provided by the U.S. Navy, the United States has sent at least 55 marine aircrafts and 30 ships to the South Korean east coast. Further, the *USS Bonhomme Richard* and *USS Boxer*, which carry AV-8B Harrier attack jets and V-22 Osprey aircrafts, are also being used for the joint exercise.

According to the reports, the scope of the exercise has been expanded to include the surgical strike rehearsals on North Korea's major nuclear and missile facilities and "decapitation raids" on the North Korean leadership. The joint forces will also run through their new "4D" (detect, disrupt, destroy and defend) operational plan, which essentially involves detailing of the allies' preemptive military operations against North Korea's nuclear and missile arsenal.

Apart from strengthening surveillance in the Northeast Asian region, the exercise is largely considered as a move to discourage North Korea from pursuing its nuclear programme. It seems that the focus of the joint military drill is on rehearsing precision

targeting North Korea's key nuclear facility, i.e., the Yongbyon site. North Korea's nuclear proliferation moves have become a cause of grave concern globally. However, despite strong condemnation from the international community, North Korea claims that since 2006, it has conducted at least four successful nuclear tests till now including the latest one carried out in January 2016. It has conducted nuclear tests in 2006, 2009, 2013 and 2016. Moreover, it is in the process of developing its long-range missile capabilities. So as to pressurise North Korea to abort its controversial nuclear programme, the United Nations has imposed several economic sanctions on the country.

South Korea is also planning to impose more individual/unilateral sanctions on North Korea as also on individuals and entities from different countries engaging North Korea commercially. Thai, Taiwanese and Singaporean shipping firms have been either blacklisted or imposed with financial sanctions by South Korea. Though North Korea's nuclear tests have been a global concern, South Korea, due to its proximity and differences with North Korea, is threatened by the North Korean programme. If North Korea continues to develop its missile capabilities, South Korea will also have to work on its defences. Therefore, South Korea has been at the forefront of trying to halt North Korea's nuclear ambitions. Furthermore, for South Korea, this exercise in general and the United States' presence in the region in particular are reassuring of the latter's commitment for maintaining peace and stability in the region. As expected, it has still drawn strong criticisms and negative statements from North Korea. North Korea's National Defence Commission issued a long statement to condemn and oppose the joint exercise. The excerpt from the statement states:

“We have a military operation plan of our style to liberate South Korea and strike the U.S. mainland ratified by our dignified supreme headquarters. We have deployed ‘offensive means’ to strike South Korea and ‘U.S. imperialist aggressor forces bases in the Asia-Pacific region and the U.S. mainland’. The army and people of the DPRK will launch an all-out offensive to decisively counter the U.S. and its followers' hysterical nuclear war moves... If we push the buttons to annihilate the enemies even right now, all bases of provocations will be reduced to seas in flames and ashes in a moment.”

In the light of the recent dramatic events taking place in the Northeast Asian region, countries such as South Korea, Japan and the US are finding it difficult to deal with North Korea through diplomatic means alone. Two reasons may be cited for South Korea and the United States' ineffectiveness to stop North Korea and bring it to the negotiating table. First, different countries have adopted differing approaches to deal with the challenges. South Korea considers China's efforts to convince North Korea inadequate, whereas, the United States wants Japan to play a bigger role in Northeast Asia. Revision of constitutional provision in Japan to permit its military in carrying out a range of activities may be seen in that context. However, it is also important to note that bilateral differences between the countries are posing challenges. For instance, while Russia-United States tensions have been ever-growing, China and Japan are still involved in a maritime dispute in the East China Sea.

Second, till now, sanctions and joint military efforts have been unproductive in putting diplomatic pressure on North Korea and leading it towards non-proliferation of nuclear weapons. In fact, it is evident that North Korea is least likely to be affected by sanctions, which has been under self-imposed isolation, and also, international community imposed sanctions for several decades now. Instead of putting North Korea under any kind of pressure, these sanctions and military exercises are strengthening regime security inside North Korea. Given that the people of North Korea are least connected to the outside world, the Supreme Leader of North Korea, Kim Jong-un is using these sanctions and South Korea-United States alliance to his advantage by depicting South Korea-United States' joint efforts as a part of the United States' ploy to annihilate North Korea. This is serving North Korea's twin purpose. One, it is maligning South Korea's image inside North Korea; thereby, limiting the number of people taking refuge in South Korea. According to a report published in *The Guardian* (May 7, 2015) "the number of North Koreans seeking refuge in South Korea has dropped significantly, with recent figures showing that just 1,396 defected in 2014. Between 2008 and 2013, the number of refugees leaving annually was between 2,400 and 2,900." Two, Kim Jong-un is successfully justifying the country's nuclear ambitions as well by labelling moves such as sanctions as a threat to the country's national security.

While all these moves are to deter North Korea's proliferation acts, the recent developments have made it clear that North Korea perceives these as provocative measures and is acting accordingly. Here, China's geographical proximity as well as five-decade-old friendship with North Korea may be put to use. China's direct economic and political leverage with North Korea enables it to exercise its influence on North Korea. China is its only gateway to the outside world, its ally and largest trading partner. Given that China's role is crucial in this murky situation, it may consider putting diplomatic pressure on North Korea. Clearly, of all the countries, China is bound to play a bigger role in bringing peace to the region. Because of its geographical proximity to the Korean peninsula, any form of tension on the Korean Peninsula affects China too. Also, its economic relations with South Korea as also with the United States should be considered as important as its alliance with North Korea. Surely, China does not want to jeopardise its relations with either of the two Koreas. Also, its interest lies in projecting itself as a responsible regional power and international stakeholder.

However, the problem still remains that though China has also been opposing North Korea's nuclear tests, it still stands by the 1961 China-North Korean Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Assistance. Time has come for China to play the role of a responsible international stakeholder. Nevertheless, it will not be the job of China alone. South Korea and the United States will be equal partners in this endeavour. In that regard, alongside the 'six-party talks' a more informal 'four-party talk' involving North and South Korea, US and China, may also be devised which can specifically work on avoiding the brinkmanship between North Korea and South Korea. Acting as a more responsible stakeholder on the North Korean nuclear issue might turn out to be an 'image makeover episode' for China, which has been facing multiple challenges in both East China Sea and the South China Sea. This would also encourage South Korea to further deepen and widen economic ties with China.

In essence, denuclearising North Korea will not be a cakewalk for the major stakeholders. A united approach engaging the three countries – South Korea, China and the United States – with South Korea at the lead should be employed.

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The Views expressed are that of the Researcher and not of the Council.*