

Continuation of Policy By Other Means: Ensuring that US-ROK Military Exercises Don't Increase Risk of War

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Abstract: This article assesses the current risk of war on the Korean peninsula in light of renewed North-South, US-North and US-China tensions in the wake of the US decision to implement the THAAD program in South Korea, current US-ROK military exercises, and North Korea's recent nuclear test. It suggests a course in which political initiatives overcome recent military moves that increase tensions in the region.

1. INTRODUCTION

This essay argues that it is critical that military exercises not pre-empt US political objectives while President Donald Trump comes to grips with the “multilemma” that North Korean’s nuclear breakout poses for US strategic policy.



The cutting of the poplar tree at Panmunjon in Operation Paul Bunyan,

August 1976

War, wrote Clausewitz, is the continuation of policy by other means. War time means are largely military; and require constant practice if they are to support policy. Thus, the United States and its ally South Korea exercise their joint military forces and military strategies in regular cycles. There are many types of military exercises and all are simulations of war, some of them more realistic than others; but all designed to realize political-military objectives. In South Korea, two back-to-back exercises have just begun that are the most politically significant due to their scale and history, coinciding with a fractious strategic moment in the Korean conflict. These are Foal Eagle, a command post exercise that began on March 1, 2017; and Key Resolve, a massive land exercise that includes joint and combined field training of ground, air, naval, and special operations forces, etc., that was formerly known as RSOI (Reception, Staging, Onward Movement, Integration), and during the Cold War as Team Spirit.¹

Key Resolve is scheduled to commence on March 13, 2017 and lasts until some time in April 2017. It will involve 17,000 American and more than 300,000 South Korean troops,—said to be pegged at the same scale as 2016.² According to media reports, Key Resolve “will simulate a full-scale war scenario that assumes the deployment and readiness of THAAD, the U.S. missile defense system, at its designated location in central South Korea.”³

There are three issues that make these exercises problematic in 2017. The first is that the United States does not have a clear policy with regard to North Korea under President Trump's new administration. The White House is currently conducting its Korea policy review,⁴ with its main progenitor, General Michael Flynn, having resigned shortly after initiating the review. The policy review is examining all options but is incomplete. To date, President Trump's statements on North Korea have ranged all over the map including the notion of hamburger diplomacy, the suggestion that China "take out" Kim Jong Un, and Trump's being "very angry" at the DPRK's missile test. They provide little insight into what his preferences are for dealing with North Korea. The "now you see it, now you don't" visas issued then withdrawn on the same day (February 25, 2017)⁵ for North Korean diplomats to visit New York for private talks underscore this apparently confused state of the Administration's stance towards North Korea. Likewise, the United States reportedly postponed a US-ROK-Japan trilateral meeting on sanctions implementation against the DPRK dubbed The Grim Reaper in early March due to the on-going policy review.⁶ By default, US policy today amounts to continuation of the *status quo ante* of the Obama administration, with a primary emphasis on military containment. It is possible that Trump will simply deepen this policy by piling on the military and sanctions pressure; but it is equally possible that the past is not prologue to the future and that US strategy will be obliged to shift radically due to the pace and press of events. It is incumbent, therefore, for US Forces Korea to not slam shut doors today that should remain open in the future.

The second is that South Korea's president sits under a cloud of impeachment. The Blue House has continued under the Prime Minister's direction to sustain President Park's anti-DPRK hostility and loose talk about regime change. The moribund leadership may encourage the

DPRK to provoke the ROK (and vice versa). Meanwhile, the pending elections in South Korea could lead to a radical shift in the ROK's *nordpolitik*. Thus, the oscillating status of South Korea's strategic orientation towards the DPRK deepens the uncertainty about allied strategy created by President Trump's statements and imminent military exercises on the North-South border.

Third, the North Korean-Chinese relationship is in a state of distemper. Hostility surfaced in the DPRK's statement after China condemned its February 12, 2017 missile test, with KCNA characterizing China as a power competing with the United States for hegemony as the root cause of escalated tension in Northeast Asia.⁷ However, China's initial response was a slap on the wrist that cut coal imports from the DPRK by about \$1 million or 16,295 tonnes imposed on February 13, 2017. This was explained by China as justified by its high mercury content, not the missile test.⁸ The relationship became positively wrathful after China cut the DPRK's coal exports in 2017, leading the DPRK to dismiss its erstwhile ally as "dancing to the tune of the U.S."⁹ In fact, China's move was a power play exploiting the DPRK's alleged assassination of Kim Jong Nam in Kuala Lumpur airport on February 13, 2017 to put the onus on the Trump Administration to resolve the US-North Korea conflict.¹⁰



Tactically Smart, Strategically Stupid

The decision to deploy Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) in South Korea and the approval of its siting on February 28, 2017 is especially salient to managing the political dimension of the risk of war arising from the exercises. The prospect of DPRK missile launches during the exercises apparently induced the United States to expedite deployment of a THAAD unit to the ROK on March 6, 2017 with prospective operational status in April,¹¹ that is, in the midst of the exercises instead of the previously announced planned deployment between mid-2017¹² and the end of 2017.

The deployment that began with the first THAAD shipment to the ROK arriving on March 6, 2017 appears to have been rushed. The accelerated deployment was reportedly in response to an ROK request. (However, the notion advanced in the *New York Times* that it was in response to the DPRK missile tests on the same day is absurd as the delivery flight would have left the United States on March 5, 2017, before the unannounced DPRK missile salvo occurred, and takes time to prepare for shipping). Advancing the timing was politically unwise given ROK opposition parties policies on THAAD (which might lead to eviction of THAAD after the next election were it to be deployed early and if things go badly with the North during the exercises).

China is clearly profoundly angered by the THAAD deployment decision.¹³ The reasons for this strong response, including the de facto cancellation of Chinese tourism to South Korea for the immediate future, are complex. THAAD on its own is not a direct military threat to China. Indeed, to the extent that it works at all, it is easily overwhelmed by the North Koreans by firing multiple missiles, some of which can be equipped with simple decoys to defeat

THAAD's radar, and in the future, deploying submarine-launched missiles that would evade its limited search azimuth angle (about 108°).

However, THAAD radar operating in the ROK *does* reach into Northeast China, and integrated with other US ballistic missile defense systems at sea on Aegis destroyers, and with the radars that support US missile defenses based in Alaska, it provides the United States with additional early warning of Chinese long-range missile lift-off. It conforms to a general buildup of US forces in the Western Pacific that counters China's ability to deny offshore areas to the US navy and air force, waters and air space that the US operated with almost absolute superiority for the entire Cold War up to now. The US response does not provide it with any certainty of "victory" in a shootout with China, for example, over the Taiwan Straits or the Korean Peninsula. Rather, it simply increases China's uncertainty that it could successfully attack US forces operating offshore without suffering a devastating defeat, leaving both sides uncertain as to the outcome of such a collision. THAAD's marginal contribution to this regional American strategy to counter China's area-denial capacity is effectively zero. But symbolically, its deployment in Korea embodies not only the US intention to bolster its alliance with the ROK and to offset North Korean nuclear and missile threats with a perceived upgrading of its military capacities. It also represents a general push to contain China, from Beijing's perspective, and is the antithesis of China's general line that the United States should accommodate its great power interests in the region, and not oppose its assertions to various claims with regard to disputed islands or regions such as the South China Sea.

Thus, a militarily insignificant but politically potent weapon system has been introduced into Korea at a time of rapidly increasing tension. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi is correct when he characterizes the DPRK and the

United States (and its ROK ally) as two locomotives accelerating towards each other and doomed to a catastrophic collision if nothing is done to resume dialogue.¹⁴

It is entirely conceivable that the DPRK might assume that China would be more inclined not to punish it for provocations conducted against Japan, China, or the United States under these circumstances, and could therefore exploit THAAD deployment during the exercises as a rationale to provoke a massive South Korean response to a DPRK incursion against the South, not least to draw US naval and air forces into the region in order to put pressure on China to soften its sanctions against the DPRK. As Na Young Lee, Andy Lim, and Victor Cha suggest, it is important to listen carefully to distinguish between North Korean “normal” incendiary rhetoric in response to US military exercises, and that which has prefigured low level provocations in the past.¹⁵

It is indeed technically feasible to rush THAAD into South Korea and to bring it into operational status in April (rapid deployment and operational status of a THAAD unit transferred from Texas to Guam was achieved in about three weeks in April 2013^[16]). Given the script for the Foal Eagle exercise, which includes THAAD deployment in the context of all-out war in Korea, the US military should consider with great caution any suggestion within the Trump Administration that THAAD become demonstrably operational during the exercises. Achieving the operational goals of the Spring 2017 exercises should not be confused with THAAD, whose deployment may directly affect strategic stability in the Peninsula should the DPRK exploit its presence to attack the US or ROK forces during the exercises or some other military covert or overt attack, precisely because it will align itself thereby with China. Having made a tactically smart, but strategically stupid early deployment, it is now critical to remove THAAD from sight and the political equation for the

duration of the exercises, or pay a high price.¹⁷

Given recent events, particularly the growing tensions between China and the DPRK, US Forces Korea might be forgiven for planning a muscular version of the exercises in 2017, after two years of relative calm following the confrontations during the 2015 cycle. Nonetheless, it is essential that US Forces Korea ensure that these exercises are calibrated to enable a political strategy that not only contains but reduces the DPRK threat, especially the nuclear threat, and are not staged as an end in themselves. It is critical that the exercises not only reassure the DPRK and strengthen the US-ROK alliance; but that they also serve the larger US strategy of coercive diplomacy with regard to the DPRK military and nuclear threat. This superordination of the exercises by US Forces Korea with respect to coercive diplomacy boils down to ensuring that they are conducted in a manner that does not close options for diplomatic engagement by the Trump Administration, at which time the various uses of military force might become truly strategic. Coercive diplomacy as part of an overarching strategy requires both elements to be in play. If not, one is trying to cut with a one-bladed scissors resulting in a mess.

Managing Nuclear Risk on the Peninsula

The March-April exercises planned for the ROK are not the first time that the political context of strategy has demanded that the military dimension conform to strategic objectives. This has occurred many times in Korea, most obviously with regard to the postponement of Team Spirit exercises in 1993-1994 to enable negotiations on the US-DPRK Agreed Framework. At this formative time in the Trump Administration’s Korea policy, and at a time of high tension on the Peninsula, it is critical that military exercises not pre-empt US political objectives while President Trump comes to grips with the “multilemma” that

North Korean's nuclear breakout poses for US strategic policy.¹⁸

Essentially US Forces Korea's goal should be to complete the exercises to improve readiness and to reinforce the US-ROK alliance without presenting indicators to the North that suggest it is massing forces sufficient to conduct a pre-emptive military attack against North Korea involving ground forces, with offshore air support, naval forces, and surge reinforcements. It should also not allow indicators to surface suggesting that deception is being used to disguise such activity.

Provided US Forces Korea and the ROK military avoid immediately destabilizing combinations of offensive and defensive forces in the exercises, from a strategic stability viewpoint, US Forces are free to exercise however they see fit. After all, as North Korea's own annual cycles of military exercises as well as those staged for specific political purposes such as the December 2016 mock attack on South Korea's Blue House observed personally by Kim Jong Un,¹⁹ exercising is what militaries do until they fight wars.

It is therefore urgent that deliberate and systematic measures be taken to control the risk of military confrontation and escalation during these exercises. These measures relate to nuclear command-and-control; bombers; petroleum-oil-lubricants and logistical support; US missile tests; invitations to third parties, especially China and Russia, and non-governmental organizations, to observe; full advance and daily briefings by USFK on exercise script; rhetorical restraint by US political and military leaders; other forms of reassurance such as proposing reciprocal military exercise and force reductions; strict control of how the revised rules of engagement are applied under the current conditions of political oversight by the ROK government; and preparations to halt or adjust exercises if something goes badly wrong.



US & South Korea amphibious exercise, March 2016

Measure 1: Maintain Continuity of US Nuclear Command, Control and Communications

The interaction of US and DPRK nuclear command-and-control systems is poorly understood, let alone a three way (US-DPRK-PRC) interplay on NC3 systems. Each state has a different NC3 "stability bias" in terms of the procedural and technical negative and positive controls they use for their nuclear forces.

Drawing on Conley's important work on NC3 interaction, it is possible to conceptualize how a military clash in the Peninsula or offshore may move one or more of the region's nuclear weapons states to weaken its negative and strengthen its positive controls on the use of nuclear weapons, that is, they would become more not less inclined to use nuclear weapons.

Negative controls, aimed at ensuring that unauthorized use never occurs, fall into two types—organizational and technical measures. Lower alert levels are an example of negative control organizational measures; electronic locks on warheads are an example of negative control technical measures. Likewise, positive

controls, aimed at ensuring that authorized and authenticated use always occurs without failure, also present these two types of measures. Pre-delegating authority in the case of loss of connectivity with the authorizing command is an example of a positive control organizational measure. Maintaining redundant and diverse, nuclear-hardened communications and sensor systems for targeting and damage assessment are examples of positive control technical measures.²⁰

The tension between these two categories of controls is known as the “always-never” paradox of nuclear control. Over the years, nuclear weapons states have developed different combinations of these measures to manage this paradox, given their respective technical capacities, wealth, political and military cultures, organizational structures, and force postures. They exhibit different biases towards positive and negative controls that affect their propensity to use nuclear weapons. These biases may interact in unanticipated ways, especially when more than two states are involved. Arguably, drawing on Conway’s important work in this field, they exhibit at least eight different possible “stability biases” depending on the types of adversaries that they face.

In the case of a nuclear truel or US-China-DPRK NC3 interaction, the United States NC3 system is well resourced (“Wealthy NC3” in Conley’s framework), and is biased towards heavy negative organizational and technical controls, but also endowed with a set of highly capable organizational and technical positive controls. In contrast, China presents a centralized NC3 system biased towards reliance on procedural negative controls, and not supplemented by much in the way of technical controls. North Korea manifests a hybrid of a poor and military-dominated NC3 system. It is likely biased towards centralized and personalized use authority relying on procedural positive controls; but also

influenced by a military bias towards technical positive controls, with little in place organizationally or technically to ensure negative control in times of crisis or war.

There are a number of NC3 indicators that each of these nuclear armed states undoubtedly uses to monitor the others’ intentions and status of their nuclear forces. However, what patterns they (and independent observers) generate in their interaction in various scenarios of conflict remain poorly understood in concrete terms. The interplay between them, depending on whether the circumstances are routine or crisis-afflicted, and whether nuclear forces and threats are being used for deterrence, compulsion, or reassurance by one or more of the states, is complex, indeterminate, and likely chaotic. Accordingly, the response by each state is also likely to be improvised and vulnerable to spinning out of control as one or more loosens or halts negative controls, and shifts towards primary reliance on positive controls due to fear of pre-emption. How non-nuclear weapons states such as South Korea and Japan enter into this truel, let alone a four way standoff or quarrel (involving Russia as well), is an important question that lends an additional element of uncertainty to the outcome. Their own military rules of engagement with North Korea, for example, may indirectly trigger conflict between nuclear weapons states with the North or with each other, but how this wild card might affect the interaction of NC3 systems in the region is indeterminate.

At minimum, sudden changes in the operation of US NC3 systems that are monitored by the North Koreans should be avoided in the current exercises. In 2013, a set of near simultaneous events were reported on the Internet in a combination that could easily have been misread by the North Koreans (and their allies)—see Table 1. These events included putting a TACAMO (Take Charge and Move Out) plane into the air that transmits nuclear

fire orders to US submarines; the departure of five long-range stealth bombers; and a change in the format that the United States uses to verify the transmission of its nuclear fire orders over the radio. Whether the United States intended these events to send a message is unknown; and if so, if it was received and understood as a warning as might have been intended, is also unknown. What is certain is that, like the Soviets, for example, during the Able Archer exercise,²¹ the NKs monitor such transmissions and would have had to interpret them. What US Forces Korea should not do is to send an unintentional message, especially in an era of Internet and social media field reporting.²²

days, the EAMs have included a preamble, as well as a "character count," a way for those receiving the messages to know for sure exactly how many characters they're supposed to receive. In theory, the preambles refer to a specific action or mechanism. This seems complicated, and I don't fully understand it all, but that may be the point. If you're North Korea, you'll notice that your main adversary is no longer communicating with its nuclear forces in the same way. This suggests that something is up. What that something is may well be nothing — or it might mean that the U.S. has ratcheted up an alert status, or has changed the way it exercises nuclear command and control forces. The unknow-ing-ness is the point."

Table 1: Real-Time Posts on the Open Web, April 7, 2013

1) *TACAMO deploys: (bonus mention of B-1s) "posted on Apr, 5 2013 @ 10:12 AM Sounds like our troops are getting ready for a fight in the Pacific, and or a preemptive strike."*

2) *5 B1s disappear.*

"So, the question is: where did five B-1s deploy to last night?"

3) *North Korea monitors EAMs (Emergency Action Messages) and we've changed how we send them as the crisis heated up.*

"Actually, according to several of those hobbyists, the U.S Air Force and the U.S. Strategic Command have started to use a new format for their EAMs, just as the crisis with North Korea heated up. Generally, EAMs to nuclear forces are short, consisting of 30 characters often divided into four or five blocks. Thrice daily, test EAMs are sent out. Every day, the call sign for the airborne command posts change. (Today, one of the TACAMO planes was "ESTIMATE.") In recent

Along the same lines, one should not deploy ground-based, mobile satellite NC3 systems used for theater nuclear operations in conventional military exercises, even if these are "dual capable." Their use may suggest that nuclear attack is in the offing.



US, Japan & South Korea naval exercise, June 2012

Measure 2: Deploy Strategic Bombers with Care

North Koreans are very sensitive and alert to B-52 and stealth long-range nuclear capable bombers flying in their vicinity even in routine “peacetime.” This state of mind is due to: a) Strategic Air Command’s bombing campaign in the war which ran out of targets in the first six months of the war; b) the specific B-52 operations during and after the August 1976 crisis designed to scare the shit out of the North Koreans (as one senior US official told me not long afterwards); and c) US precision bombing since the end of the Cold War in various wars leading to occupation and regime rollback has been studied closely by the North Korean military, especially the use of strategic bombers to destroy air defenses to pave the way for ground forces to attack with tactical air cover from fighter-bombers stationed in Korea.

The events of August 1976 are still a defining event for North Korean military although many Americans have forgotten about them. In this collision, initiated by a miscalculation by Kim Il Sung likely seeking to test US resolve after the US withdrawal from Vietnam the year before, the United States and North Korea came closer to full-scale war than at any time since the Armistice; only this time, US nuclear weapons were mobilized in Korea, nuclear war plans existed and were exercised to conduct limited nuclear war, and either side could have easily lost control of the situation as it unfolded. In particular, the North Koreans remember that after Operation Paul Bunyan in which the offending poplar tree was cut down, B-52 bombers continued to fly up the Korean Peninsula towards the DMZ for a month, veering off parallel to the DMZ only at the last moment.

The North Korean military also knows that strategic bombers are the most likely delivery system for nuclear weapons against them

because submarine-launched or intercontinental land-based missiles fired from the United States are constrained by the risk of escalation with Russia and China. Firing either at the DPRK would threaten both of those states with attack because they wouldn’t be able to determine who is being attacked with their current early warning systems and it is highly unlikely that the United States would do so without first informing Moscow and Beijing; and it is equally unlikely that they would do nothing in response should a nuclear weapon be launched by one of these means.

Strategic bombers also are evocative of the two decades of Team Spirit exercises—at one point the largest US military exercises in the world, even bigger than the NATO Reforger exercise. The current exercises in Korea may suggest that the United States has revived truly massive exercises on a similar scale to Team Spirit.

Overall, planes in Korea, Guam or Japan sufficient for conducting an advance strike on the DPRK followed up by other long-range bombers should not be deployed during the exercises. Finally, such bombers should not be deployed in conjunction with aircraft carriers in close proximity to Korea. These should be moved away from Korea during bomber flights to Korea if they occur; and the North Koreans should be informed as to the location and routing of these battle groups. Currently the USS Vinson is patrolling in the West Pacific.²³ Up-to-date locational advice to the DPRK Military can be delivered by briefing third parties who retain communication channels with Pyongyang, whether they are NATO allies, or Russia or China.

Measure 3: Avoid Large-Scale Pre-Positioning of Petroleum, Oil and Lubricants

Exercises are very fuel intensive. Prosecuting a war requires that US Forces Korea import huge volumes of logistics, in particular, petroleum,

oils, and lubricants. In wartime, US Forces Korea would rely primarily on domestic ROK stockpiles for these supplies until an armada of logistical and fuel supply vessels arrive to restock. The DPRK's problem is to distinguish between a force able to conduct a sustained attack and occupation of the DPRK, and a force that is merely exercising. Exercises can be conducted using in-country ROK fuel supplies. Of course, at the rate that oil tankers line up to offload oil into the ROK, it would not be difficult to replenish supplies drawn down by the exercises and even to top up in readiness to attack the North using the exercises as cover. Nonetheless, it would be prudent to not surge large-scale logistic supply and pre-positioning operations such as fuel resupply ships into the theater, and in Korea/Japanese ports in particular, in the midst of large-scale ground force exercises in the ROK. Likewise, it would be best to avoid introducing a large number of refueling and military transport planes into the theater during the exercises. The arrival of the first of thirteen new CJ-130 Hercules in Yokota Air Force Base on March 6, 2017 is an instance of an apparently innocuous re-equipping of an existing unit that may increase resupply capacity greatly during the changeover of the previous aircraft stationed at the base.²⁴

Measure 4: US Missile Test Timing

US missile tests are of great concern to the DPRK because a missile could be armed with nuclear weapons and aimed at them. US missile tests often generate a great deal of social media and twitter storms. This is likely their earliest warning of a US missile attack. The US postponed a Minuteman test in 2015 (April) because it could have been misinterpreted by North Korea as part of an attack at a time of high tension and rhetoric from the DPRK about nuclear war.²⁵

On February 8, 2017, three days before the North Korean test on February 12, 2017, the United States [fired a Minuteman 3](#)

[missile](#)²⁶ from Vandenberg California to Kwajalein Atoll in the Western Pacific, 6700 km away (although this is only about half its maximum range when loaded with a single W87 thermonuclear warhead which detonates with about one third to one half a million tonnes of TNT equivalent). On February 14, 2017, two days after the North Korean February 12 missile test, the United States fired a [US Trident missile test](#) from a submarine offshore Vandenberg to Kwajalein, the first of four Tridents fired between February 14 and 16, 2017.²⁷



On March 6, the DPRK fired four missiles into the East Sea of Korea/Sea of Japan.²⁸ Such salvos have been a typical response to the commencement of large-scale exercises in South Korea in the past.²⁹ It is important to consider the latest test in relation to the US and DPRK missiles tests between February 8 and 16, 2017. North Korean nuclear tests have typically occurred after the United States and China have cooperated on a UN Sanctions resolution whereas they have tested missiles more often after a Chinese threat to collaborate with the United States in a direct manner to

redress North Korean behavior. Whether the latest tests were a riposte for the Trident tests,³⁰ a reaction to China's coal cuts on February 18, a poke in Japan's eye to put pressure on the United States³¹ and to prepare the way for a provocation against the ROK during the exercises, or is part of its on-going testing program driven by technical factors, cannot be determined.

Should tensions increase over the exercises, it is incumbent on US officials to ensure that US missile tests are not fired without proper evaluation of the timing and possible misinterpretation by North Korea. If necessary, authoritative statements should be made to counter mischaracterization of missile tests as aimed specifically at North Korea. In this regard, timing as well as substance is critical. Thus, it was reasonable after a February 16, 2016 Minuteman test from Vandenberg for US Deputy Defense Secretary Robert Work to explain that: "We and the Russians and the Chinese routinely do test shots to prove that the operational missiles that we have are reliable. And that is a signal ... that we are prepared to use nuclear weapons in defense of our country if necessary"³²—but would not be in the midst of a crisis with North Korea in 2017. American missile commanders should therefore seek political guidance before conducting missile tests in the Pacific until the end of April 2017 rather than proceeding on auto-pilot in their operational testing activities.

Measure 5: Other Forms of Reassurance

In the past, North Korea has been invited by UN Command to observe US-ROK exercises alongside UN command allies and remaining members of the Neutral Nations Supervisory Commission. If this has not been done in 2017, such an invitation should be issued immediately. Given the stakes, it would be sensible to also invite China and Russia. In addition, US Forces Korea and the ROK military should invite US and ROK civil society

groups to observe the exercises as an independent form of monitoring and verification of the daily routines and script.

Along the same lines, US Forces Korea should advance a serious proposal for reciprocal military exercise reductions either on a trilateral, intra-Korean or on a regional basis involving the six parties to the talks held over the years in Beijing on the North Korean nuclear issue. Substantial experience in such an approach was gained in Europe during the Cold War³³ and should be considered for application in the Korean context. Elements of such an agreement may include measures related to frequency, scale, type of military exercises, and inspection and monitoring rights associated with these measures.

Rather than the brief glimpse issued to captive media to date, US Forces Korea should announce publicly the entire exercise script before the exercises begin (obviously this is too late for Foal Eagle, but not for Key Resolve). Each day, US Forces Korea should issue a daily brief on the previous day's exercise activities; and each morning a timeline and script of that day's exercises, and what is coming up, and variations from the original script. Consistency of what is being said with what the North Koreans observe is an important confirmation that there is a non-threatening explanation for activities that could otherwise be viewed as a deceptive cover for a cold-start pre-emptive attack.

It should not need to be said; but given past incidents, and given the Korean context in which the face of leaders is critically important on both sides of the DMZ, US Forces Korea must ensure that no US or ROK troops engage in gratuitous activity that could needlessly challenge the DPRK leadership's legitimacy. Such activity in the past has included using DPRK leadership figurines as target practice,³⁴ mock assassinations, and mock nuclear weapons seizures such as reportedly

occurred in 2016 exercises.³⁵

Measure 6: Playbooks for Provocations, Accidents, and Chaos

US Forces Korea needs to have its playbooks close at hand for various contingencies that could ambush the best-planned exercise. It needs to be ready and able to halt, redesign, postpone, or simply end the exercises mid-stream in response to possible DPRK actions that could lead to confrontations that might spiral out of control. There is also a finite chance that US or ROK forces will do something in the exercises by mistake that will generate a crisis, for example, a lost helicopter strays north of the DMZ, or confused circumstances involving ships and submarines unfolds in disputed waters in the west that results in a North Korean vessel being attacked. It may also be useful to truncate the length or specific types of exercises as the situation evolves between now and the end of April 2017. For example, if the DPRK faces additional international sanctions in response to the VX attack that killed Kim Jong Nam, then a nuclear test might be staged in the middle of the exercises. This would call for extreme caution in the conduct of the exercises at very short notice, especially if the alert level of the combined forces were increased in response to such a test.

Relatedly, as noted above, the current political situation in the ROK National Command Authority suggests the need for extraordinarily

close coordination by USFK and the ROK high command to ensure that the rules of engagement, changed after the 2010 clashes with the DPRK, do not lead to premature and disproportionate response to DPRK provocations, or worse, ROK provocations of the DPRK. The US Ambassador as well as the US Commander in Korea need to communicate *before* the ground exercises begin on this issue with the Blue House, the ROK military, and senior ROK commanders, to ensure that there is absolute clarity on the rules of engagement, and where there is not, deliberately or otherwise, to close that gap before the exercises begin.

This is a revised and expanded version of a NAPSNET special report.

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Notes

¹ Overviews of past exercises in the ROK are found in: R. Collins, “A Brief History of the US-ROK Combined Military Exercises,” *38 North*, February 26, 2014, see [here](#). John Chu, *Military Exercises in Korea: A Provocation or a Deterrent to War*, Naval War College Paper, February 2006, J. Farrell, *Team Spirit: A Case Study on the Value of Military Exercises as a Show of Force in the Aftermath of Combat Operations*, Air Force Research Institute, Maxwell Air Force Base, 2009, published in *Air and Space Power Journal*, Fall 2009, pp. 95-106 Vito D’Orazio, “War Games: North Korea’s Reaction to US and South Korean Military Exercises,” *Journal of East Asian Studies*, 12:2, pp. 275-294 see [here](#).

² Jack Kim, Ju-min Park in Seoul and Phil Stewart, “South Korea, U.S. begin large-scale annual drills amid North Korea tension,” Reuters, March 1, 2017

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⁵ Reuters, “Plans for first post-Trump US contact with North Korea cancelled, says report,” *The Guardian*, February 25, 2017.

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⁷ KCNA, “Minju Joson Points out Root Cause of Escalated Tension in Northeast Asia,” February 12, 2017.

⁸ Reuters, “China rejects North Korea Coal shipment,” February 15, 2017.

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