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The Strategic Background Behind the ROK-U.S. Joint Military Exercise and Its Impacts on Inter-Korean Relations

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Military authorities in the ROK and the U.S. decided to conduct a joint military exercise in the second half of this year from 18 to 28, August. Whether this joint military drill should be carried out had largely remained unclear due to the concurrence of spread of COVID-19 and an argument in favor of delaying it to make a new breakthrough in stalemated inter-Korean relations. In the end, a decision has been reached to conduct the combined exercise on a smaller scale. This decision is the result of the following line of strategic thinking. More than anything, carrying out a combined exercise is a procedural step required for the OPCON transfer slated for 2022. Furthermore, the positive benefits of deferring the exercise to enhance the negotiation leverage against North Korea cannot be guaranteed although such an expected benefit can be acknowledged in theory. The decision to have the ROK-U.S. joint military exercise runs the risk of negatively impacting inter-Korean relations for the short-term, given North Korea's recent move to focus on a 'security guarantee' instead of economic and humanitarian cooperation. To that end, the ROK government should make an effort to persuade North Korea in advance so as to prevent the current impasse from further deteriorating to an extent similar to the confrontational phase of military tensions that existed in the pre-2018 period.

Military authorities in the Republic of Korea (ROK) and the U.S. reportedly conducted a Crisis Management Staff Training (CMST) on August 11, 2020. CMST is a preliminary exercise in the lead-up to a full-scale military drill slated for August 18 to 28 and aims to maintain the ROK-U.S. combined defense posture against the possible local provocation and terrorism of the North Korean military. Two conflicting opinions abounded over this ROK-U.S. joint military exercise: this drill is a phased step necessary for the transition of wartime operational control (OPCON) scheduled for 2022; and it should be delayed to make a new breakthrough in currently stalemated inter-Korean relations. In the end, a conclusion was reached to carry out the exercise after a certain adjustment had been made to the size of mobilized forces, the scheduling of the drill, and the exercise's activities. As the impact of this decision would likely reverberate throughout inter-Korean relations, this paper will review two competing arguments of those in support of the inevitable need for conducting the joint military exercise vs. those in favor of delaying the exercise. It will also analyze the implication behind the decision for scaling back the combined military drill as well as the subsequent impact it could bring to inter-Korean relations in the future.

Inevitability in Preparation for OPCON Transfer vs. the Need for Delay to Make Progress in the Korean Peace Process

What lies at the core of the former argument is that it is a phased step required for successfully completing the transfer of OPCON within the terms of the Moon Jae-in government, and that it is an issue that needs to be discussed and determined primarily within the framework of the ROK-U.S. alliance. The ROK and the U.S. reached an agreement on a 'conditions-based approach to the transition of wartime operational control (OPCON)' at the 46th ROK-U.S. Security Consultative Meeting in 2014, conditions of which include the following: ▲ 'ROK armies' sufficient capability to command joint forces,' ▲ 'early warning and preparedness against the North Korean nuclear and missile threat,' and ▲ 'the security environment on the Korean Peninsula and in the region is conducive to a stable OPCON transition.'

The verification and evaluation of the essential part of those conditions, 'ROK

forces-led combined defense command,' is divided into three phases as follows: verification and evaluation of ① Initial Operational Capability (IOC), ② Full Operational Capability (FOC), and ③ Full Mission Capability (FMC). The first phase was already completed last year. Those in support of the inevitability for combined exercises basically argued that the initial pledge can be implemented only if at least a core procedure of 'FOC' is completed within this year given that the Moon government's terms of office ends in May, 2022. In other words, this combined exercise is considered a minimum requirement for the OPCON transfer.

By contrast, some maintained that putting off the combined exercise is necessary to turn around the current impasse in inter-Korean relations. Their claim is in line with what Minister of Unification Lee In-young said in response to a question about combined exercises in a confirmation hearing on July 23 that "it would be better to delay the exercise." One of important grounds for this argument is a view that a decision to delay the joint military exercise played a significant role, among others, in having created a mood conducive to inter-Korean reconciliation before and after the PyeongChang Winter Olympics. In fact, President Moon Jae-in said in an interview with NBC news onboard the *Gangneung* Line KTX (Korea Train Express) on December 2017 that South Korea could review suspending Key Resolve and Foal Eagle joint military drills if North Korea halts its military provocation during the Olympics. The proponents believed that this statement certainly brought about a positive impact on having thawed inter-Korean relations thereafter.

In fact, the view that a large-scale ROK-U.S. joint military exercise may negatively impact inter-Korean relations corresponds to some research findings and North Korea's actual responsive patterns. The ROK-U.S. joint military drills, first initiated in 1954, have been continuously implemented, albeit under different names depending on the purpose and the size, such as *Ulchi* Focus Lens (UFL), Foal Eagle, Key Resolve, and Ulchi Freedom Guardian. North Korea has perceived such a continuation of the combined exercises as an actual military threat to its regime. North Korea's perceived threat is evidenced by some empirical research outcomes that there exists a meaningful correlation between the size and the intensity of combined exercises and the volume and intensity of the North Korean major organizations' criticism toward South Korea.¹⁾

Furthermore, it could be inferred that conducting combined exercises will have a negative impact on the implementation of various inter-Korean cooperation projects. For example, last year, at the working-level consultations, North Korea refused to receive South Korea's food aid, taking issue with the ROK-U.S. combined exercises after it had already agreed on South Korea's plan to provide the North with food aid through the channel of the World Food Program (WFP). What gives weight to this argument in favor of delaying the combined military drill is a circumstantial factor that North Korea recently took a radical action to blow up the Inter-Korean Joint Liaison Office in *Kaesong* on June 16 as well as the claim that 'security guarantee' measures are what North Korea actually wants. Along the line of this concern is that the Ministry of Unification-led inter-Korean cooperation projects, such as small-scale trade in public health cooperation, food assistance, and exchanges of daily necessities, will only be limited in terms of feasibility and utility if not accompanied by security guarantee measures.

Strategic Meaning Behind the Decision of Downsizing the ROK-U.S. Joint Military Exercise

Amidst such a heated controversy, the ROK and U.S. governments decided to conduct the combined military exercise at a smaller scale to only include some of the very essential functions of FOC verification. Then what kind of strategic judgment came into play in having made such a decision? They might have viewed that even though the argument of those in favor of deferring the exercise could be acknowledged, provided that it could lead to enhancing a negotiation leverage against North Korea, the real benefits of deferring it may not be as great in number as expected. In fact, there exists doubt over whether North Korea, having already completed its nuclear force and proclaimed itself a nuclear armed-state, would view the ROK-U.S. joint military exercise as highly threatening to its regime as it did

1) Ahn-guk Yoon and Kyung-mo Ahn, "Analysis of North Korea's Response on the ROK-U.S. Joint Military Exercise: Re-review on Variables of Military Threat," *The Quarterly Journal of Defense Policy Studies*, vol. 34, no. 1 (2018). (in Korean)

before.²⁾ If not, suspending the combined exercise might not bring about that great of an effect in increasing the leverage over negotiations against North Korea.

While it seems to be a historical fact that the ROK governments in the past had utilized the ROK-U.S. joint military drill as a means for coercive diplomacy in the hopes of having an upper hand in negotiations against North Korea,³⁾ the Kim Jong Un regime appears to believe that the regime has already secured a certain level of military deterrence against the U.S. thanks to the sophistication of its nuclear and missile capabilities. This is also confirmed by Chairman Kim Jong Un's speech at the 6th National Conference of War Veterans on July 27, 2020 when he mentioned 'self-defense nuclear deterrence.' If Chairman Kim meant what he said that day, suspending the combined exercise, albeit certainly a welcoming gesture to the North, would be highly unlikely to have been viewed as a significant security guarantee measure to an extent that would change North Korea's basic policy line of 'frontal-breakthrough' and pressuring the South. Under such a premise, delaying the combined military exercise would only have a limited utility.

In addition, a consideration behind that decision would have been that the OPCON transfer, too, is one of the crucial policy goals for the Moon government. The current ROK government's desire for a swift transfer of OPCON appears to remain unwavering, although the government inserted the wording 'early date' in Task 86 of 100 Policy Tasks of the Five-year Plan of the Moon Jae-in Administration ('To transfer wartime OPCON at an early date on the basis of a solid ROK-U.S. alliance'). This raises a doubt over whether that pledge, came out after his inauguration, would slightly regress from his initial pledge of 'within his terms of office' made during the presidential campaign. President Moon delivered a speech

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- 2) 'Nuclear armed-states' is a common noun that refers to states physically armed with nuclear weapons regardless of ensuing legitimacy questions that encompass the NPT regime. The adjective 'illegal' is added in front of that noun when emphasizing the illegality of North Korea's nuclear development program. Bong-geun Jun, *Politics of Denuclearization* (Seoul: Myung In Publisher, 2020), p. 5. (in Korean)
- 3) Leon V. Sigal, translated by Kapwoo Koo, Kap-Sik Kim, Yeo-ryeong Yoon, *Disarming Stranger: Nuclear Diplomacy with North Korea* (Seoul: SahoiPyoungnon Publisher, 1999), p. 68. (in Korean)

at the 69th Armed Forces Day on September 28, 2017 that “The handover [of the wartime operational control] on the basis of our independent defense capabilities will ultimately lead to a remarkable advancement in the fundamentals and abilities of our military.” This can be interpreted as an expression of the will that the takeover of the OPCON is necessary not only for securing our sovereignty, but also for enhancing our military capabilities. While some assert that the OPCON transfer and the advancement of the ROK–U.S. alliance is possible without conducting the combined military exercise, forging the exercise by changing the agreed procedures would have been somewhat problematic for the ROK government in terms of its future credibility.

After all, the ROK government appears to have made such a decision within the constraints of a scheduled plan in preparation for an imminent OPCON transfer, rather than seeking to enhance the negotiation leverage against North Korea by delaying the exercise, which would accompany a certain level of uncertainty. Some claim that the OPCON transfer within the terms of the Moon government has become uncertain since the adjustment in the size and contents of the exercise has made the verification of FOC all the more difficult. However, had the joint military drill been put off, a real possibility of taking over the OPCON would have been even slimmer. In addition, the calculation behind the government’s decision would have been that the ROK could get its message across to North Korea at an inter–Korean dialogue for humanitarian cooperation on the inevitable need for a scaled-back combined exercise in the face of spreading COVID-19. Such a decision can be evaluated as a compromised one between the inevitability of conducting the drill and the need for delaying it as stated above as well as a strategic one after having comprehensively weighed the pros and cons of the two options.

Future Direction in Inter–Korean Relations

In sum, while the recent ROK government’s decision to conduct the combined military exercise at a smaller scale can be evaluated as a rational compromise, it is also true that this decision is somewhat out of sync with a ‘bold measure of improving inter–Korean relations’ envisioned upon the reshuffling of major foreign

affairs and security departments' positions, including the Blue House National Security Office, the Ministry of Unification, and the National Intelligence Service. The spread of COVID-19 and the full-swing presidential election campaign leaves the U.S. with little room to seek a new turning point in North Korea-U.S. relations by holding a summit or presenting a flexible denuclearization roadmap. Against this backdrop, it is also unclear whether North Korea would accept South Korea's proposal for various humanitarian cooperation projects in its entirety. The North Korean regime's durability in the face of sanctions, proven time and again, is highly unlikely to go through rapid changes triggered by the COVID-19 crisis.

With consideration for such a strategic situation, the ROK government needs to maintain active and precautionary efforts in persuading the North. It should also make it clear to North Korea via various inter-Korean channels that it was an inevitable decision to conduct a scaled-back combined exercise this time and that the ROK is willing to cooperate on tackling the internal and external issues North Korea currently faces, including cooperation in public health and food and disaster assistance. That is considered a 'maintenance measure' to deter the North from taking provocative military actions, mentioned by the North after it had demolished the Inter-Korean Liaison Office in *Kaesong*, or from provocations against the U.S., such as an ICBM launch that could bring about much more severe consequences. With such a maintenance effort in place, the Korean Peninsula Peace Process may regain the momentum required to be put back on track if there occurs some kind of internal change in North Korea or if a turning point has been made via North Korea-U.S. negotiations before and after the November U.S. presidential election.

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