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# North Korea's Perception and Behavior toward the ROK-US Joint Military Exercise

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North Korea's nuclear and missile provocations have continuously intensified. North Korea stressed this year's ROK-US joint military drill as a reason for provocation and used it to justify its nuclear and missile advancement. North Korea has strategically used the ROK-US joint military exercise to actively build up internal solidarity and convey a message to South Korea and other countries. North Korea's strategic recognition and behavior in relation to the joint military drill must be evaluated both in relation to the post-Kim Il-sung era and separately within the current Kim Jong-un era. This will help understand North Korea's strategic behavior toward the joint military exercise from the perspective of changes and continuity of perception and the strategic environment. This article contends that North Korea's political perception and security concerns regarding the ROK-US joint military exercise have not changed significantly for a long time, but the Kim Jong-un regime has strategically used the joint military drill since 2019 to advance its nuclear capabilities. It does, however, claim that there is no need to be overly concerned about North Korea's provocations, and that joint military exercises and denuclearization efforts must be continuously enhanced.

The ROK-US joint military exercise (hereafter referred to as the joint exercise) in response to North Korea's nuclear threat has continued into 2023. The joint military drill is a natural and necessary deterrent training exercise in response to

North Korea's "illegal" nuclear armament and threats. North Korea has continued and emboldened nuclear and missile provocations, such as the recent test launch of the Hwasong-18 ICBM (Intercontinental Ballistic Missile), citing the joint military exercise as an excuse, while strengthening internal solidarity by mobilizing large crowds and expressing hostility toward South Korea and the US. This article discusses the Kim Jong-un regime's perception and behavioral features of joint military training, as well as the ROK's course of action.

### **North Korea's Perception of ROK-US Joint Military Exercise**

Three main characteristics can be validated by North Korea's long-standing response to the ROK-US joint military practice. First, North Korea approaches joint military exercises from a political standpoint. North Korea has historically viewed the combined military drill as a sign of the so-called "hostile policy" that undermines its sovereignty and supreme interests since the Kim Il-sung period. North Korea condemned the joint military exercises for "abandoning and destroying the armistice agreement" calling it a "blatant declaration of war." In other words, North Korea utilizes the ROK-US joint military exercise to reproduce and reinforce its enmity toward the United States and South Korea. Second, North Korea is apprehensive about joint military exercises. North Korea did not try to conceal its security concerns by calling it "war practice for the invasion of North Korea," "beheading strategy," "nuclear blackmail," and "nuclear war disturbance." North Korea may be concerned about the likelihood of an actual war with the ROK-US alliance, particularly if the US uses nuclear preemptive strikes. Third, North Korea views the joint military exercise as an anti-imperialist act by the United States. This international politics-centric perspective is reflected in North Korea's remarks, such as "the foothold of the Asian ruling strategy" and "the cunning ploy under the Asia-Pacific-focused strategy."

To this day, the aforementioned three perceptual characteristics have been repeatedly validated throughout the Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il eras. The

experience of war and fear about the ROK-US alliance's overwhelming military force are at the root of this perception. In fact, the level of security concerns can be gauged by an order for operational posture given by the North Korean authority in response to ROK-US joint military drills during the Kim Jong-il and Kim Jong-un regimes. In response to the ROK-US joint military drills, North Korea has deployed large-scale resources, issuing battle mobilization postures (2009 and 2013), and declaring quasi-war status (2015). Some argue that North Korea sees no real threat from the joint military exercises, and that the military drills even provoke North Korea unnecessarily. However, this is not an empirically valid assessment because it does not explain why North Korea readily proposed and willingly accepted a deal of "suspension of joint military training in exchange for nuclear test moratoriums" in 2018.

As such, all North Korean regimes saw the combined military exercise as an existential security threat, with the Kim Il-sung regime reportedly having the greatest security fear. The trauma of the Korean War, the tactical nuclear weapons of US Forces Korea, and the past military dictatorships in South Korea must have had a considerable influence on shaping this perception. However, Kim Jong-il and Kim Jong-un witnessed firsthand how joint military exercises did not result in an actual attack. Hence, the level of recognizing the military exercise as an "immediate" threat must have been relatively weaker than during the Kim Il-sung era. However, in the aftermath of President Trump's military coercion, symbolized by "fire and fury" in 2017, the Kim Jong-un regime must have been concerned about a nuclear war with the US. And these worries must have made the Kim Jong-Un regime keenly aware of the urgency and necessity of engaging in political bargaining with the US.

### **North Korea's Response Patterns and Implications**

Historically, North Korea has responded to joint military exercises in a variety of ways, involving military, political, and strategic aspects. First, North Korea

emphatically rejected the ROK-US alliance by conducting its own military training or staging armed protests in response to ROK-US joint military exercises. North Korea reacted politically as well, employing combined military exercise as an efficient means for governing a wartime state. The objective is to keep the dictator in charge of the military while strengthening internal solidarity. North Korea has traditionally exploited the ROK-US military drill for strategic purposes in dealing with South Korea and the US. It attempted to acquire numerous strategic advantages such as bargaining, coercion, gaining political justifications, and increasing negotiating power. Examples include linking provocation with the inter-Korean summit (2007), the withdrawal of North Korean workers from the Kaesong Industrial Complex (2013), the fourth nuclear test (2016), and the nuclear moratorium in exchange for the suspension of joint military training (2018).

However, Kim Jong-un's recent behavior is distinct from that of his predecessors. First, the Kim Jong-un regime's response is far more aggressive than in the past. Since 2001, the Kim Jong-il regime has expressed its official stance on joint military exercises 37 times. Eleven of them condemned the joint military exercise as a nuclear war drill, and seven military counteractions were actually taken. On the other hand, the Kim Jong-un regime made 48 official announcements about the joint military drills, 24 of which denounced them as a double nuclear war or highlighted responses with nuclear weapons. During the same period, the Kim Jong-un regime carried out 81 provocations, half of which occurred after 2022. Such behavior naturally and frequently encourages the additional deployment of South Korea-US combined assets, resulting in a chronically high level of security crisis on the Korean Peninsula.

Second, the Kim Jong-un regime has actively leveraged the joint military training to bolster its nuclear capabilities. The Kim Jong-un regime has justified its provocations both internally and externally, labeling the combined military drills as an unjust nuclear threat. Kim Jong-un's nuclear build-up is motivated by more than just the combined military training. North Korea's frequent provocations during the mid- and late phases of Moon Jae-in government, as well as provocations right before the 2022 joint military exercise, were unrelated to the joint military practice.

North Korea has carried out 40 provocations in the three years since May 2019. There were 34 nuclear and missile-related provocations. And yet, North Korea blames the ROK-US joint military exercises for the escalating crisis precipitated by its own nuclear provocations. North Korea's behavior gives political rationale for China and Russia using their veto power to block the adoption of additional Security Council sanctions resolutions against North Korea. It causes fissures in international cooperation to support North Korean denuclearization.<sup>1)</sup>

Third, the Kim Jong-un regime has reinforced its nuclear coercion against South Korea. The 8th Party Congress's announcement on January 2021 that tactical nuclear weapons will be secured was the first indication. By demonstrating that it is possible to mount "tactical nuclear weapons" on ballistic missiles that have been launched seven times in 15 days since September 25, 2022 (during the periods of the ROK-US joint military drill), North Korea has blatantly posed a nuclear threat to South Korea. North Korea's nuclear coercion against South Korea has recently taken two different forms. First, it is switching from the current nuclear strategy, which is focused on the United States, to a nuclear strategy that is specifically directed at South Korea. While putting aside securing a "second strike capability" against the U.S. as a long-term task, North Korea is focusing on an effective response to the conventional military power of the South Korea-U.S. alliance. Its second goal is to heighten nuclear horror. The counter-value targets of North Korea's tactical nuclear weapons are major cities, nuclear installations, and airports. This is implied by North Korea's most recent aerial bombardment of a nuclear warhead intended to maximize the lethal effect and its attempts to build a nuclear torpedo and demonstrate its effectiveness.

Fourth, Kim Jong-un is the mastermind behind all of these initiatives. During the early years of the regime, Kim Jong-un used to assume the role of a field commander to strengthen military control before and after the ROK-US joint military exercise.

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<sup>1)</sup> When North Korea launched the Hwasong-18 provocation on April 13, China's Foreign Ministry, instead of condemning North Korea's illegal behavior, issued an official statement defending North Korea, saying, "The US recently mobilized large-scale military drills around the Korean Peninsula...That provided a reason."

The number of Kim Jong-un's field guidance of military units during the ROK-US joint military exercise has increased significantly more than in the past, according to an analysis of official media reporting from North Korea.<sup>2)</sup> Since the 2018 U.S.-North Korea summit, Kim Jong-un has frequently led North Korea's military drills targeted directly at the United States and the South Korea-U.S. alliance, demonstrating that he is at the forefront of the battle against the United States. On October 1, 2022, the 77th anniversary of the founding of the Workers' Party of Korea, Kim Jong-un oversaw the "military training of the Tactical Nuclear Operation Unit of People's Army." Ten ICBM provocations were carried out between February 27, 2022, and April 15, 2023, four of which Kim Jong-Un personally observed. More than half (14 times) of Kim Jong-un's 24 public appearances between January and April 16, 2023, involved military field guidance.

### **ROK's Course of Action**

The Kim Jong-un regime's offensive against the ROK-US joint military drills will continue for a considerable period of time. North Korea is likely to believe that doing so will enhance its military and political interests both domestically and in its interactions with the South and the United States. The Kim Jong-un regime is actively working to obtain these advantages through the development and demonstration of its nuclear arsenal. The key mechanism is to instigate a crisis by engaging in blatantly illegal provocations, using strategic coercion, and spreading terror. Therefore, efforts should be made to reject and thwart North Korea's objectives by creating a strategic environment that does not condone provocations, maintaining a strong effective deterrence, and ensuring public and bipartisan trust for government policies. The following are more detailed considerations.

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<sup>2)</sup> Kim Jong-il gave military field guidance 23 times between 1994 and 2010, while Kim Jong-un gave military field guidance 56 times between the beginning and mid phase of his rule (2011 to 2017).

First, it's best to avoid taking a political approach to the ROK-US joint military exercise. The joint military drills are a means and key to strengthening deterrence against North Korea's nuclear weapons program. Some argue that the military drills should be avoided or even suspended because they serve as fodder for North Korea's provocations. As was already mentioned, North Korea continued to make active provocations even when there was no joint military drill. In other words, North Korea's ambition for nuclear weaponry and provocation, not the joint military exercise itself, is what is causing the crisis on the Korean Peninsula. Even with the ROK's concessionary stance, one cannot be certain that North Korea will take it in good faith. North Korea may continue to strengthen its nuclear weapons while citing other justifications. This is demonstrated by North Korea's behavior during the mid- and later phases of the Moon Jae-in administration. The more we use the joint military training as a means of political and diplomatic bargaining, the more North Korea will focus on suspending the joint military drill through "military coercion" while harboring false expectations. Only when North Korea realizes that joint military drills are a normal and necessary step to take as long as the ROK-U.S. alliance exists will its provocations against the joint military exercises gradually diminish.

Second, there is no need to overreact in response to North Korea's nuclear coercion. It's no surprise that North Korea's nuclear capacity and aggressive attitude are concerning. The Korean Peninsula, however, is not in a strategic environment where war can easily break out any time soon. The extended deterrence of the ROK-US alliance is working effectively. Even if the crisis escalates during the joint military training period, there is very little room for "unintended escalation." North Korea has not secured and will not secure the tactical nuclear capabilities and mass retaliation capabilities necessary for "escalation domination." Therefore, it is necessary not to interpret North Korea's continued use of various provocations that sow fear into security concerns, as it takes issues with the joint military drills.

The above two suggestions indicate that we do not need to doubt the possibility of denuclearization or to give up our denuclearization efforts. Naturally, the chances

of North Korea's denuclearization in a short period of time are low, and North Korea's nuclear capabilities will be further strengthened in the future. As a result, pessimism about the likelihood of denuclearization will gradually grow, and fatigue over the North Korean nuclear issue will ensue. The value and needs of the policy objectives should, however, be emphasized, not the difficulty or feasibility of its implementation. Both the denuclearization of North Korea and the ROK-US joint military exercises should be subject to this. ©KINU 2023

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