

Nuclear War Through North Korean Eyes

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There is little doubt that civilians on both sides of the Korean Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) are weighed down with anxiety as both countries carry out provocative large-scale military drills amid threats of nuclear war. North Korea has recently announced that it will no longer abide by the UN-brokered armistice that ended the Korean War with a ceasefire in 1953 and authorities have severed its communications hotline with the South, the only diplomatic channel of contact between the two countries.

Pyongyang has imposed no-fly and no-sail zones off both its coasts as part of comprehensive military drills that may see the test firing of short-to-medium range missiles. The US-South Korea joint command forces have launched their Foal Eagle field training exercises that will be ongoing until end of April. 200,000 South Korean troops and 10,000 US troops will take part in the exercise, which will include land, air, sea, and special operation drills. North Korea's state newspaper, Rodong Sinmun, has reported that the North's army, navy, air force, and anti-aircraft units were "just waiting for the final order to attack."

Following Pyongyang's recent threats that it would engage preemptive nuclear strikes against any aggressor, Seoul shot back with its strongest rhetoric yet, stating, "If North Korea attacks South Korea with a nuclear weapon, then by the will of the Republic of Korea and humanity, the Kim Jong-un regime will perish from the Earth." South Korea's newly inaugurated President Park Geun-hye has been in office for less than one month and in the current scenario, it has become politically impossible for her to stick to her campaign pledges of taking a softer line on North Korea. Most of the time, the substance of North Korea's threats do not materialize, much like last month's pledge to take an immediate "physical response" to a barrage of UN sanctions. While talk of taking "second and third countermeasures" are thrown around pretty liberally in North Korean state media, the North Korean foreign ministry has not announced any specific actions – such as a nuclear weapons test or rocket launch – in response to harsh UN resolutions or the ongoing US-ROK drill offensive.



North Korea invokes a brutal historical narrative of war with the United States to legitimize its conduct in the present day – and indeed, North Korea is a victim of war crimes. Washington and its allies rained napalm over North Korea, destroying nearly all its cities and thousands of villages. A staggering four million Koreans and one million Chinese soldiers were killed – US military sources confirm that 20 percent of North Korea’s population was killed off, even that being a highly conservative figure. In the fallout of North Korea’s third nuclear test, state media has invoked several English-language editorials that reflect on the overlooked historical backstory of the US stockpiling nuclear weapons in South Korea. The statement released by the Rodong Sinmun reads:

“In the 1980s the U.S. spurred the modernization of the nuclear hardware of its forces in south Korea. Member of the U.S. House of Representatives Ronald, speaking at a parliament, confessed that the U.S. shipped more than 1,000 nuclear weapons to south Korea and deployed 54 airplanes for carrying nuclear bombs. South Korea turned into the world’s biggest nuclear outpost with the stockpile of nuclear weapons such as bombs, shells, warheads, land mines and carrier means as well as nuclear bases and arsenals. The U.S. nuclear threats were vividly manifested in its open declaration to use nuclear weapons in Korea.”

For all intents and purposes, this is an accurate account. If we fast-forward toward the present-day, the Bush administration’s Doctrine for Joint Nuclear Operations issued in 2005 established the circumstances under which the US could preemptively invoke the use of nuclear weapons. The document states:

“The lessons of military history remain clear: unpredictable, irrational conflicts occur. Military forces must prepare to counter weapons and capabilities that exist in the near term even if no immediate likely scenarios for war are at hand. To maximize deterrence of WMD use, it is essential US forces prepare to use nuclear weapons effectively and that US forces are determined to employ nuclear weapons if necessary to prevent or retaliate against WMD use.”

The North Korean Foreign Ministry's recent statement, "[Second Korean War Is Unavoidable](#)", argues that the DPRK reserves the right to a preemptive nuclear attack and the Foal Eagle joint military exercises are akin to Washington lighting a fuse for a nuclear war. The document also acknowledges the Obama administration's pivot to the Asia-Pacific region, and that the US "seeks a way out of a serious economic crisis at home in unleashing the second Korean War." Many analysts throughout the alternative media have acknowledged North Korea's history as a victim and have defended their acquisition of a nuclear deterrent. While the historical context of abuse warrants one to be empathetic toward Pyongyang in this respect, many of these commentators fail to necessitate the primacy that inter-Korean dialogue should hold in their writings. It should also be noted that when official figures, such as Jon Yong-nam of the Kim Il-sung Socialist Youth League, utter phrases like, "We vow to plant the flag of the central military command and the North Korean flag on Halla Mountain on Jeju Island [South Korea]", it makes the deterrent argument far less convincing.

In recent times, the North has provided slight openings for foreign media to enter the country and speak to its citizens, and undercover testimony has been smuggled out. Recent reports [published by Radio Free Asia \(RFA\)](#) detail the intellectual insecurity of North Korean civilians, who in consuming copious amounts of state media in the absence of any other source, deeply fear the threat of strikes or an invasion from foreign powers.

RFA quotes a resident of North Korea's Yanggang Province who has allegedly said, "The authorities said if we have nuclear weapons, we can scare off anyone we meet, but on the contrary even though we have nuclear weapons and we're shouting that we might launch a preemptive strike, I'm worried it seems we might receive a preemptive strike." Another resident in Hamgyong Province said, "If we shoot off a nuclear weapon, are the Americans going to stay motionless? In any case, if nuclear weapon is launched everyone dies, so I feel there's no use for training or anything."



Although these anonymous testimonies, appearing on the US State Department-run RFA, likely serve as some form of propaganda, it is highly plausible that a percentage of the North Korean population feels quite uneasy about the current state of affairs. One could offer their rhetorical support for North Korea's acquisition of nuclear weapons as a deterrent, but what will become of some 10.5 million innocent civilians in Seoul if the North attempts to proliferate its nuclear arsenal? Likewise,

3.2 million souls in Pyongyang would be extinguished if the US employed its preemptive nuclear doctrine. The potential death toll should not be limited to those in capital cities, the reemergence of conflict on the Korean Peninsula immediately endangers the 70 million people living there. For all the fiery rhetoric exchanged between the two Koreas, the fact that the hardline Lee Myung-bak regime, incumbent President Park's predecessor, did not retaliate when the North shelled Yeonpyeong island in 2010 demonstrates the extent to which restraint has been exercised for the sake of stability.

The only thing keeping the situation from deteriorating is the fact that North would probably not come out victorious if it went to war with South Korea and the United States. While the North boasts larger manpower, more submarines, and more fighter jets, the South possesses highly sophisticated weaponry and modern defense technology by comparison – for this reason, Pyongyang has put more focus on the development of ICBMs and nuclear warheads. Military experts say North Korea is years away from developing a long-range missile and a nuclear warhead to attack the US mainland; however the damage it could do to South Korea and Japan has the potential to amass high civilian casualties and shouldn't be under-estimated. One could argue that the case has never been stronger for the withdrawal of the 28,500 US troops stationed in South Korea. Such a move that would satisfy civilians in both Koreas and yield higher chances of provoking a positive response from Pyongyang during this tense period; however, that simply isn't going to happen. As the Pentagon pivots to the Asia-Pacific, North Korea is a godsend in its ability to provide Washington with a legitimate pretext to bolster its forces in China's backyard.

As tensions increase on the Korean Peninsula, the only power that has any influence to broker an agreement that could de-escalate hostilities is China. Following North Korea's third nuclear test, many Chinese citizens took part in a historically unprecedented outbreak of anti-North Korea protests, and both China's state-run media and various policy experts are becoming more vocal in their criticism of Beijing's North Korean policy. China partnered with the United States to co-author recent UN resolutions against Pyongyang, exhibiting new heights of Beijing's disapproval with the Kim dynasty. An editorial in China's Global Times newspaper reads, "If North Korea engages in further nuclear tests, China will not hesitate to reduce its assistance to North Korea." The editorial went on to say that if the US, Japan and South Korea "promote extreme U.N. sanctions on North Korea, China will resolutely stop them and force them to amend these draft resolutions."

Kim Jong-un has demonstrated his willingness to go against the wishes of his main allies in Beijing, which has visibly frustrated those on the Chinese side, who have for years attempted to nudge Pyongyang into implementing meaningful economic reform. China should do more to denounce unnecessary and provocative military drills that have the potential to lead to fire exchange and inter-Korean turbulence. More likely than not, these threats will not materialize and tensions will deescalate in time. China hosted tri-lateral talks in Beijing with Pyongyang and Washington in attendance a decade ago in April 2003 – at the time North Korea withdrew from the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, fired a short-range missile into the Sea of Japan, violated South Korean airspace with a fighter jet, and threatened to abandon the 1953 Armistice Agreement. The present day scenario is highly unpredictable and it's clear that Beijing must take the initiative to deescalate this situation and bring all parties together to the negotiating table to work out a new agreement – one that establishes meaningful inter-Korean security assurances that lead to both sides scaling back military drills and provocative muscle flexing – such is a prerequisite for any kind of normalization of relations.

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