

U.S-South Korean “Operational Plan” Raises the Risk of War. Calls for a “Preemptive Strike” on North Korea

By [Gregory Elich](#)

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In recent months, U.S. and South Korean military officials have signed agreements that heighten the risk of conflict on the Korean Peninsula. In June, the two sides established a new operations plan named OPLAN 5015. For the most part, details of the plan remain under wraps, but the little information that has been revealed is sufficient to raise concern.

OPLAN 5015 is said to lay out the approach the U.S. and South Korea will take in limited war scenarios, and calls for a preemptive strike on North Korea, taking out its strategic targets and launching “decapitation” raids to kill North Korean leaders. There is an apparent contradiction in the use of the term ‘preemptive’ as a response to conflict, and implies that the aim is to carry out attacks that are out of proportion to the triggering event.

Just how much or how little it would take to put OPLAN 5015 into effect is not publicly known. Would an exchange of fire between North Korean and South Korean vessels be enough to set events into motion? Or what about an incident such as took place in 2010 when artillery shells hit Yeonpyeong Island?

Regardless, OPLAN 5015 is a disturbing recipe for an escalation of conflict. Indeed, it is impossible to imagine North Korea submitting to the assassination of its leaders and the destruction of military sites without responding in kind, with full-scale war ensuing.

Asahi Shimbun reports that sources indicated the plan “deals with surprise military provocations by Pyongyang through the use of its special forces.” That seems rather a narrow focus to develop a major operations plan around, and an unnamed source told Hankyoreh that Oplan 5015 “outlines how U.S. and South Korean forces would operate during the outbreak of war or some other crisis.” That wording, particularly the last three words, would appear to indicate that the plan has much broader coverage than reported by Asahi Shimbun.

The 47th annual Security Consultative Meeting was held on November 2 in Seoul, where U.S. and South Korean military leaders ratified their plans. The two sides warned that “any North Korean aggression or provocation is not to be tolerated,” and agreed to implement the 4D Operational Concept, which stands for detect, disrupt, destroy, and detect.

The 4D Operational Concept relies upon South Korea’s Kill Chain, which is an integrated system for tracking and carrying out preemptive strikes on North Korean missile sites, based

on the perception of a possible North Korean missile launch. The Kill Chain is slated for completion about a decade from now, after which the plan will be fully capable in operational terms.

OPLAN 5015 is said to adopt a far more aggressive approach than OPLAN 5027, which it replaces. According to one source, "As far as I know, the new plan seeks for a victory in the early stage to keep war damage in the South to a minimum." That objective is based on the questionable presupposition that assassinating North Korea's leaders would lead to a quick surrender. That is a thin premise on which to gamble hundreds of thousands of lives.

In the context of hostile U.S. policy, in which any engagement with North Korea is ruled out, and the only language Washington can speak is that of sanctions and threats, the adoption of OPLAN 5015 and the 4D Operational Concept risks regional stability in Northeast Asia. It should also be recalled that in 1993-1994 and again in 2006, before he became U.S. Secretary of Defense, Ashton Carter advocated attacking North Korea. Given the proclivity of U.S. leaders to condemn nearly every North Korean action as a "provocation," the unanswered question is what level of 'provocation' would trigger a preemptive attack on North Korea and plunge the Korean Peninsula into war?

Gregory Elich is on the Board of Directors of the Jasenovac Research Institute and the Advisory Board of the Korea Policy Institute. He is a columnist for [Voice of the People](#), and one of the co-authors of [Killing Democracy: CIA and Pentagon Operations in the Post-Soviet Period](#), published in the Russian language.

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