

TENSIONS ON THE PENINSULA

Strategic Communication for the US-Northeast Asia Alliance System

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As the 2024 US presidential election approaches, provocations by North Korea are expected to increase in frequency and severity, increasing tensions on the Korean Peninsula. In deterring aggression amid a dearth of communication with Pyongyang, the US-Northeast Asia alliance system must reassess its strategic messaging in its responses to North Korea's provocations and in alliance military exercises while also avoiding inadvertently raising such tensions. At the same time, the United States must also strive for long-term policy stability relating to the Indo-Pacific region to avoid undermining deterrence and public confidence of alliance system member states.

As 2024 commenced, Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK, or North Korea) experts debated whether North Korean leader Kim Jong-Un had decided to go to war.¹ Although the issue remains unsettled, based on historical data, the general consensus is that as the United States' 2024 presidential election nears, there will likely be an uptick in the frequency and severity of the DPRK's destabilizing military activities, often referred to as provocations.² The anticipated tense security environment on the Korean Peninsula mandates that the US-Northeast Asia alliance system—comprising the US bilateral alliances with the Republic of Korea (ROK, or South Korea) and Japan and the trilateral cooperation among the ROK, Japan, and the United States—review its strategic communication approach to North Korea with the goal of strengthening deterrence while simultaneously preventing an inadvertent escalation in tensions.

Potential for Conflict

While this author concurs with experts who argue it is unlikely that Kim Jong-Un has made the decision to go to war, the environment is ripe for North Korean armed

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1. Robert L. Carlin and Siegfried S. Hecher, "Is Kim Jong Un Preparing for War?," 38 North, Henry L. Stimson Center, January 11, 2024, <https://www.38north.org/>.

2. Victor Cha and Andy Lim, "Slow Boil: What to Expect from the DPRK in 2024," Center for Strategic & International Studies (CSIS), January 16, 2024, <https://www.csis.org/>.

aggression below the threshold of full-scale conflict. For starters, the expected spate of provocation comes amid a lack of communication between Pyongyang and the alliance system, increasing the odds of inadvertent escalation, particularly as a result of a misinterpretation of the alliance system's intent.³

Second, Northeast Asia geopolitical tensions have been building and will likely continue unabated. Accompanying increased tensions have been what are perceived as tit-for-tat displays of advancing military capabilities and aggressive rhetoric between Pyongyang and the alliance system. The combination of these factors increases the risk of miscalculation in a situation that currently lacks avenues to seek clarification and that is marked by a persistent and pervasive lack of trust.

Complicating matters is that North Korea has been emboldened by its emerging security cooperation with Russia.⁴ Amid outrage surrounding Russia's invasion of Ukraine, it is unlikely Moscow will pressure Pyongyang in line with the international community's concerns. Likewise, Beijing continues to enable Pyongyang's evasion of sanctions, raising questions about its willingness to rein in North Korea.⁵

Lastly, if North Korea displays a capability to hold the US homeland at risk with nuclear weapons, its leadership will be further emboldened to sow doubt in US security guarantees to South Korea and Japan. This could lead Pyongyang to calculate it can undertake limited armed aggression with impunity, believing the White House would be hesitant to respond.⁶

A Role for Strategic Communication

The US Department of Defense's concept of strategic communication stresses the importance of US government efforts in concert with its Allies to "engage key audiences to create, strengthen, or preserve conditions favorable for the advancement of [its] interests, policies, and objectives through the use of coordinated programs, plans, themes, messages, and products synchronized with the actions of all instruments of national power."⁷ In line with this effort, the US-Northeast Asia alliance system must

3. Jeongmin Kim, "North Korea 'Blocking' Hotlines to South Korea, Unification Ministry Says," NK News, April 10, 2023, <https://www.nknews.org/>.

4. Hyonhee Shin, "North Korea Has Sent 6,700 Containers of Munitions to Russia, South Korea Says," Reuters, February 26, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/>.

5. Jack Kim and Ju-min Park, "UN Members Concerned China, Russia Helping North Korea-US' Austin," Reuters, November 14, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/>.

6. Sooyoung Oh, "What the US Midterm Results Mean for South Korea's Security and Economy: China Remains at Center of US Foreign Policy in East Asia, Leaving Little Room for Imagination on the Korean Peninsula," KoreaPro, November 14, 2022, <https://koreapro.org/>.

7. *Strategic Communication Joint Integrating Concept* (Washington, DC: US Department of Defense [DoD], October 2009), ii, <https://www.jcs.mil/>.

employ strategic communication to influence Pyongyang to avoid escalating geopolitical tensions.⁸

Yet the DoD's *Strategic Communication Joint Integrating Concept* stresses that messaging is only complete once the receiver has interpreted the message. Thus the challenge of effective communication is to anticipate what signal will trigger the desired interpretation.⁹ Or as one analysis on strategic narratives notes, "military strategy rooted in elite politics and social dynamics is difficult to separate from strategic narratives," emphasizing that "military strategy forms a meaningful discourse that unites political narration, public understanding, and the application of military force to influence as adversary."¹⁰

Therein lies the crux of the matter: the US-Northeast Asia alliance system must avoid inadvertently escalating tensions with an opponent that refuses to communicate while simultaneously maintaining readiness to strengthen deterrence and reassure its public of its commitment to protect and defend it from aggression.

To address this conundrum, this article offers recommendations for the US-Northeast Asia alliance system to adjust its strategic communication in the areas of its strategic messaging surrounding DPRK provocations and US Ally and partner regional military exercises. This article also contends that the United States must seek long-term policy stability with regard to security guarantees for alliance system member states that supports the strategic messaging objectives of deterrence and public reassurance.

DPRK Provocations and Responses

Among the most pressing areas in need of strategic communication adjustments is the perceived US-Northeast Asia alliance system's military responses to the DPRK's provocations that fall below the threshold of armed aggression.

Some alliance system activities, such as missile tests, have occurred after a provocation by North Korea. As a result, media outlets in and outside South Korea report that these alliance activities add to tensions on the Korean peninsula. Yet DoD and State Department officials stress the alliance system's military maneuvers are scheduled well in advance and are not in direct response to any one such provocation. Instead, officials note that such prescheduled activities are intended to maintain military readiness.¹¹ But if the information space—including the media and policy forums—views the alliance system's activities as responses to individual DPRK provocations, how does North Korea perceive these activities? The uncertainty surrounding this question warrants an alliance system that intentionally works to avoid having its intent misinterpreted.

8. See, for example, David K. Berlo, *The Process of Communication: An Introduction to Theory and Practice* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1960), 11–12; and Carl Hovland, qtd. in Dick Lee, "Developing Effective Communications," Extension, University of Missouri, March 2022, <https://extension.missouri.edu/>.

9. DoD, *Strategic Communication*.

10. Nick Blas, "Beyond Storytelling: Operationalizing Strategic Narratives in Military Strategy," *Æther: A Journal of Strategic Airpower & Spacepower* 2, no. 1 (Spring 2023): 46, <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/>.

11. Author interviews, off the record, with various senior DoD officials, April 8–18, 2024.

The ongoing spate of DPRK missile tests has the region on edge.¹² Pyongyang has unilaterally scrapped the entirety of the inter-Korean Comprehensive Military Agreement (CMA)—the 2018 military accord between it and Seoul intended to ease interstate tensions through implementing measures including ending military drills near the border and establishing no-fly zones—and has started to rebuild armed guard posts along the inter-Korean border, among other anti-CMA provisions, increasing tensions on the peninsula.¹³ Kim Jong-Un has also rejected the maritime border between the Koreas, threatening to use force against vessels in this area.¹⁴ North Korea's provocations have included firing artillery shells into the inter-Korean buffer zone and warning of “an unpredictable phase” on the Korean Peninsula, all in all increasing the odds of accidental armed exchange in the border region.¹⁵

As the author has written elsewhere, every provocation from North Korea is not deserving of a response. Instead, the alliance should acknowledge certain military exercises as normal and expected, adhere to a schedule of military exercises, and strengthen missile defense, thus focusing on maintaining readiness and deterrence and avoiding “the political pressure and pitfalls of continuing to respond to North Korea's antics.”¹⁶ If the alliance system's actions are being incorrectly perceived as in response to the DPRK's provocations, the alliance system should then take steps to correct the narrative in an effort to strengthen crisis stability.

Despite the US government's stance that the alliance does not respond to individual DPRK provocations, this claim is not consistent with historical data nor is it currently consistent across the alliance system. For instance, the South Korea–US alliance conducted exercises in response to a 2017 North Korean intercontinental ballistic missile launch.¹⁷ Today, under the ROK's Yoon administration, Seoul has taken a more assertive stance by not only responding in kind but also often upping the ante to DPRK provocations.¹⁸ Notably, so far under the Yoon administration, all of the DPRK's provocations have been below the threshold of an imminent armed threat.

North Korea and the international media have interpreted the US-Northeast Asia alliance system as flexing its military prowess in response to DPRK provocations. This

12. Karl Friedhoff, “Redeploying US Tactical Nukes May Not Go Far Enough for South Koreans,” *Korea Pro*, October 22, 2022, <https://koreapro.org/>.

13. Soo-Hyang Choi, “North Korea Scraps Military Deal with South, Vows to Deploy New Weapons at Border,” *Reuters*, November 22, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/>.

14. Kim Eun-Jung, “South Korea Reaffirms Commitment to Defending de Facto Maritime Sea Border,” *Yonhap News Agency*, February 15, 2024, <https://en.yna.co.kr/>.

15. Jeongmin Kim, “North Korea Launches Ballistic Missile after Criticizing US Extended Deterrence,” *NK News*, November 17, 2022, <https://www.nknews.org/>.

16. Jessica Taylor, “Not Every North Korean Missile Needs a Response. South Korea and the US Should Focus More on Readiness and Deterrence,” *New Atlanticist*, Atlantic Council, April 27, 2023, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/>.

17. Terri Moon Cronk, “U.S., South Korea Conduct Exercise Following North Korean Missile Launch,” *DoD*, July 5, 2017, <https://www.defense.gov/>.

18. Ju-min Park and Soo-Hyang Choi, “North Korea Fires Artillery at Sea against South Military ‘Gangsters,’” *Reuters*, January 5, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/>.

perceived demonstration of military power has at times included shows of force through missile tests, live artillery fire, and the US deployment of nuclear-capable weapon systems within the vicinity of North Korea.¹⁹

Pyongyang's misperception of the alliance system's intent poses some risks. For instance, alliance activities in response to DPRK provocations increase the likelihood of misinterpretation of alliance signaling possibly due to an accident or a misreading of the alliance system's posture. For example, in October 2022, a missile crashed immediately after launch at a ROK military base during a joint drill by South Korea and the United States, which the ROK joint chiefs of staff reported as a response to the DPRK launching of intermediate-range ballistic missiles the day prior.²⁰ But what would have happened if this missile had instead landed in the vicinity of North Korea? The lack of communication with Pyongyang only further heightens the risk of a retaliatory response since the alliance would not be able to notify the North Korean government of the accident.

Observers note that what should be especially alarming for South Korea in possible scenarios like this is the DPRK's success in producing solid-fueled ballistic missiles, which reduce the time required for Pyongyang to prepare missile launches, increasing the chance of an immediate retaliation.²¹ By thus responding to a provocation that did not pose an imminent threat, the alliance risked an escalation in tensions from a potential accidental misfire. But even absent an accident, militarily responding to such provocations still risks the misinterpretation of the alliance's messaging as an imminent attack on North Korea. As one scholar argues, the alliance cannot be sure its intended message of a show of force will be perceived as such by North Korea.²²

North Korea's shifting nuclear employment doctrine only further complicates matters. Pyongyang now proclaims that military officials can use an "operation method" predetermined to conduct a nuclear strike "immediately" and "automatically" at a time of emergency where the core command leadership is under danger.²³ Observers note these changes all suggest North Korea now includes signs of "imminent attack" as conditions to use nuclear weapons, which marks a significant break from the DPRK 2013 law that only listed situations of second strike, not preemptive strikes.²⁴ This

19. William Gallo, "South Korea Embraces 'Tit for Tat' Approach to North's Provocations," VOA [Voice of America], January 6, 2023, <https://www.voanews.com/>; and Kim Gamel and Yoo Kyong Chang, "US Bombers, Jets Fly near N. Korean Border in Show of Force after Missile Test," *Stars and Stripes*, September 18, 2017, <https://www.stripes.com/>.

20. Lim Jeong-won, "Hyunmoo Missile Crashes in South Korean Base During Joint Drills," *Korean JoonAng Daily*, October 5, 2022, <https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/>.

21. Michael Cohen, "South Korea's new SLBMs are a signal to North Korea and the United States," NK News, September 21, 2021, <https://www.nknews.org/>.

22. Van Jackson, *On the Brink: Trump, Kim, and the Threat of Nuclear War* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

23. Colin Zwirko and Jeongmin Kim, "Kim Jong Un Says He Will 'Never Give Up' Nuclear Weapons, Rejects Future Talks," NK News, September 9, 2022, <https://www.nknews.org/>.

24. Zwirko and Kim.

further heightens the importance of the US-Northeast Asia alliance system avoiding military responses to provocations that do not pose an imminent threat.

Strategic Communication Recommendations

The alliance system should abstain from militarily responding to DPRK provocations that fall below the threshold of an immediate threat to the system's territories and populations.

Some observers argue the populations of alliance member states are the intended audience of alliance military responses to DPRK provocations, rather than North Korea itself. This is partially correct. Not only is the US-Northeast Asia alliance messaging focused on Pyongyang but it also aims to reassure the public of the system's political will and military ability to respond in a unified fashion in the event of armed aggression. Yet there are a couple of issues with this approach as it pertains to those provocations that do not pose an immediate armed threat.

For one, military responses to such provocations do not replicate the political or the military decision-making environment that alliance senior leaders would have to confront amid a crisis that did pose an immediate threat. For instance, in responding to a provocation, the White House likely does not assess that it risks a DPRK nuclear retaliatory strike on the US homeland by doing so.

Furthermore, there is little evidence that alliance military activities perceived as a reaction to DPRK provocations below the threshold of an immediate threat aid in reassuring the Allied public of the alliance system's will and capability to come to their defense if necessary. Instead, calls in South Korea, and to a much lesser extent Japan, for the states to obtain an indigenous nuclear weapon capability are increasing.²⁵ In addition, concerns have been raised among the ROK public and regional observers that the efforts to militarily respond to the DPRK's provocations are adding to tensions unnecessarily.²⁶ As a result, responding to such provocations not only fails to achieve the alliance's objectives but also risks inadvertently raising tensions and losing the international community's support for its actions.

The risks of inadvertent escalation significantly outweigh any benefits to a military response. Instead, the alliance system should focus on communicating that it can and will respond to armed aggression. And despite the frustrations with the DPRK's destabilizing behavior and the lack of progress in achieving lasting peace on the peninsula, the alliance system should continue to focus on diplomatic avenues to reach such a peace, reserving military avenues to respond to armed attacks.

25. Sayuri Romei, "Watching Ukraine, South Korea and Japan Eye Nuclear Weapons. Here's What the US Should Do," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, July 20, 2023, <https://thebulletin.org/>.

26. Jenny Town and James M. Lindsay, "North Korea's Nuclear Program with Jenny Town," April 11, 2023, in *President's Inbox*, produced by Ester Fang and Gabriel Sierra, Council on Foreign Relations, podcast, 35:02, <https://thepresidentsinbox.podbean.com/>.

The US-Northeast Asia alliance system should amplify its strategic communication ahead of and following its military activities.

To avoid the misinterpretation of its military readiness activities, the alliance system should increase its contact with the information environment surrounding such activities.²⁷ As previously mentioned, senior US government officials proclaim these activities are not conducted in response to any individual DPRK provocation.²⁸ This does not seem to be reflected in what amounts to unilateral activities from alliance members, as Seoul has demonstrated it will militarily respond to DPRK provocations.²⁹ Yet, while the alliance system's members at times may act unilaterally, the alliance system should still work collaboratively under shared objectives and be able to effectively communicate those objectives to avoid inadvertent conflict.

Former ROK senior government adviser Moon Chung-In asserts that South Korea has been more tepid in its responses to DPRK provocations into 2024 due to US pressure, demonstrating that such collaboration can be achieved.³⁰ Yet this is only a partial solution. To deter armed conflict, the alliance will still need to conduct military activities for maintaining military readiness and displaying the political will and military capability to act as a cohesive unit. But the alliance system should do so strategically and transparently, communicating the message that conducting military activities on the divided peninsula mandates special considerations due to the proximity and hermetic nature of North Korea.

Although those activities, such as missile readiness testing, may happen to occur following a DPRK provocation, the fact is that US missile test launches are scheduled months in advance, as this author has observed by personal experience as an active duty and reserve Air Force logistics readiness officer since 2005. For example, while the ROK/US Nuclear Consultative Group activities are strictly scheduled, they are perceived in the international media space as responses to individual DPRK provocations.³¹

To avoid misinterpretation of alliance activities, the activities should be briefed to the press well in advance and should be debriefed after the activities have concluded. In addition, the alliance system should specify in briefings that alliance activities are conducted to maintain readiness to credibly strengthen deterrence. In other words,

27. Joshua "Mule" Koslov and Kate McIlvaine, "The Truth about Messaging: Competition Requires Placing Information Objectives at the Center of All We Do," *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs* 4, no. 3 (Summer 2021), <https://media.defense.gov/>.

28. Author interviews with DoD officials, April 8–18, 2024.

29. Lim Jeong-won, "Hyunmoo Missile Crashes in South Korean Base during Joint Drills," *Korea JoongAng Daily*, October 5, 2022, <https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/>.

30. Moon Chung-In, "Rumbles of Thunder and Endangered Peace on the Korean Peninsula" Hybrid Program, January 31, 2024, produced by Korea Society and National Committee on American Foreign Policy, panel discussion and YouTube presentation, 1:15:24, audio and video, <https://www.koreasociety.org/>.

31. Jessica Taylor, "The US and South Korea Doubled Down on Ending the Kim Regime If It Uses Nuclear Weapons," in "Experts React: South Korea Embarks on a New Nuclear Era. How Will It Play Out?," *New Atlanticist*, July 19, 2023, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/>.

the alliance system should avoid being interpreted as heightening tensions and thereby possibly inadvertently heightening the threat perceptions of the alliance's public and of North Korea.

To this end, the alliance should also diversify its methods of briefing the information environment on its activities. For instance, apart from press briefings and joint statements, the alliance system should explain and clarify its activities in various print publications and on social media platforms in all three countries. In this way, it could also increase its reach to the public and the international community.

US-Northeast Asia Alliance System Exercises

In addition to its general military readiness activities, the US-Northeast Asia alliance system should be wary of inadvertently communicating hostile intent in alliance system military exercises.

The alliance system's practices in support of military readiness add credibility to strategic messaging that it has the military capability to impose unacceptable costs in response to DPRK aggression. Thereby one of the strategic messaging goals of maintaining military readiness is to deter armed aggression by hopefully influencing the DPRK's strategic decision-making calculus. Furthermore, the alliance system's exercises also display to the public that its militaries are prepared to respond if deterrence fails. But the proximity of North Korea mandates that the alliance conduct its drills in a manner that avoids messaging offensive hostile intent.

Currently, all members of the alliance system support greater security cooperation with the treaty alliances and trilaterally. This is a monumental shift from recent years. As a result of efforts to improve inter-Korean relations amid a concurrent deterioration of South Korea–Japan relations, US-Northeast Asia alliance system exercises were significantly scaled back, canceled, or nonexistent from 2018 to 2022, as in the case of trilateral cooperation during the Moon and Trump administrations.³²

Scaled-down military theater exercises meant that additional personnel and military assets were not deployed to the Korean Peninsula.³³ In addition, at times, the Trump administration unilaterally threatened to cancel or outright canceled theater-level joint ROK-US annual exercises, citing the exercises' costs or expressing the hope of using them as bargaining chips to persuade North Korea to align with US interests.³⁴

With the change in administrations in Seoul, Tokyo, and Washington, however, there has been greater alignment in DPRK threat perception.³⁵ This has come with

32. Thomas Spoehr, "Why Ending U.S.-South Korea Joint Exercises Was the Wrong Move," Heritage Foundation, May 3, 2019, <https://www.heritage.org/>.

33. Troy Stangarone, "South Korea, US Return to Large-Scale Military Drills," *Diplomat*, August 25, 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/>.

34. Eric Schmitt, "Pentagon and Seoul Surprised by Trump Pledge to Halt Military Exercises," *New York Times*, June 12, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/>.

35. Frank Aum and Mirna Galic, "What's behind Japan and South Korea's Latest Attempt to Mend Ties?," United States Institute of Peace, March 21, 2023, <https://www.usip.org/>.

multiple efforts to strengthen the cooperation and military readiness of the alliance system amid North Korea's evolving missile and nuclear capabilities. Notably, the alliance system has increased the frequency and level of joint exercises and efforts toward institutionalizing the real-time sharing of DPRK missile data.³⁶ And in 2023, the ROK-US alliance, in acknowledging its 70-year partnership, held what it categorized "as the largest exercises" ever to include its largest live-fire joint drill near the demilitarized zone.³⁷

The shift in frequency and scale of alliance system's exercises has been a drastic pendulum swing from the previous administration. At times such activities have been reported as contributing to an increase in tensions with North Korea.³⁸ Furthermore, attempts within the alliance system to return to historical exercise schedules and levels have often been perceived as responses to DPRK provocations, especially as North Korea frequently launches missiles around such military exercises as a display of discontent.³⁹

As US-Northeast Asia alliance exercises have long been a source of contention with North Korea, historically alliance system leaders have used exercises as carrots and/or sticks, depending on the administration in office, in an effort to compel North Korea to acquiesce to the interests of regional stability.⁴⁰ This comes as Pyongyang condemns such exercises, asserting that they are a rehearsal for a future invasion of North Korea.⁴¹ Still, the alliance system insists its exercises are defensive.⁴²

But whether or not North Korea is concerned about an invasion, the alliance system cannot be absolutely certain. On the contrary, what is certain is that Russia has displayed through its 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine that a neighboring state can operate under the guise of a military exercise to stage for an invasion.⁴³ And thus the DPRK may actually interpret alliance drills as an invasion threat. The lack of certainty increases the importance of ensuring the strategic communication projected from these exercises aims to avoid misinterpretation of intent, particularly with the

36. DoD, "United States-Japan-Republic of Korea Trilateral Ministerial Joint Press Statement," press release, December 19, 2023, <https://www.defense.gov/>; and Lee Hyon-jin, "S. Korea, US Plan Largest Military Drill to Commemorate Alliance," *Korea Times*, March 23, 2023, <https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/>.

37. Lee.

38. Taylor, "North Korean Missile."

39. Taylor.

40. Hyonhee Shin, "North Korea Criticizes US, South Korea Military Drills As 'Nuclear Blackmail,'" Reuters, May 18, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/>; and Robert Collins, "A Brief History of the US-ROK Combined Military Exercises," 38 North, February 26, 2014, <https://www.38north.org/>.

40. Hyung-Jin Kim, "North Korea's Kim Calls for Stronger War Fighting Capabilities against the US and South Korea," AP, March 6, 2024, <https://apnews.com/>.

41. Kim.

42. Jared Gans, "North Korea Warns US, South Korea Military Drills Escalate Tension to 'Brink of a Nuclear War,'" *Hill*, April 6, 2023, <https://thehill.com/>.

43. Alex Horton et al., "Launch of Russia Military Drills Stokes Fears of Preparations for Attack on Ukraine, As Diplomatic Sparring Continues," *Washington Post*, February 10, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/>.

expectation that North Korea is likely to carry out provocations and military exercises near inter-Korean border areas as the 2024 US presidential election approaches.

Strategic Communication Recommendations

While the alliance should conduct military exercises, it should do so in a manner that prevents inadvertent escalation while simultaneously strengthening military readiness, deterrence, and public reassurance. To these ends the alliance system's strategic communication approach to military exercises should implement certain improvements.

The US-Northeast Asia alliance system should refrain from conducting exercises in the inter-Korean border areas.

Military exercises conducted in the vicinity of the inter-Korean border areas, particularly those that include live artillery fire, needlessly raise tensions and risk unintended escalation due to an accident or misinterpretation of strategic messaging. Spring 2024's theater-level ROK-US Freedom Shield exercise started amid ROK public concern that the alliance system was exacerbating the tensions on the Korean Peninsula.⁴⁴ Aiming to quell concern, ROK joint chiefs of staff noted that none of the 48 military drills being held as part of the exercise would be conducted near the inter-Korean border areas.⁴⁵ The alliance system should make this a permanent practice.

Rather than hold exercises at exercise facilities along the border, the alliance system should instead simulate inter-Korean border areas in alternate locations, which will still allow it to strengthen deterrence through the maintenance of military readiness.⁴⁶ Furthermore, member states of the US-Northeast Asia alliance system would be more successful in maintaining their public's confidence that the alliance system as a whole is refraining from unnecessarily adding to tensions. This will increasingly be important as North Korea is expected to hold more military activities near the inter-Korean border areas following its unilateral scrapping of the inter-Korean CMA.⁴⁷

The alliance system should avoid using military exercises as a punishment or as a bargaining chip.

The alliance could avoid misinterpretations of messaging surrounding the system's exercises by only utilizing exercises for military readiness purposes. The use of exercises as a punishment undermines messaging that the exercises are purely defensive.

44. Nick Schiffrin et al., "US, South Korea Conduct Military Exercises As North Korea Ramps Up Missile Testing," PBS NewsHour, March 21, 2023, video and transcript, 6:04, <https://www.pbs.org/>.

45. Chae Yun-hwan, "S. Korea, U.S. Begin Key Annual Military Drills Amid N.K. Threats," Yonhap News Agency, March 4, 2024, <https://en.yna.co.kr/>.

46. Author interviews with DoD officials.

47. Soyoung Kim, "What Was in the Now-Scrapped Inter-Korea Military Agreement," *Diplomat*, November 28, 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/>.

In addition, exercises perceived as punishing North Korea are publicly seen as needlessly adding to an already tense environment.⁴⁸

At the same time, the alliance system should refrain from offering alliance exercises as bargaining chips. Doing so undermines military readiness and risks alliance cohesion and therefore undercuts deterrence.⁴⁹ For example, amid the scaled-down alliance system drills during the previous administrations in South Korea, the United States, and Japan, North Korea maintained its exercise cycle while also advancing its nuclear and missile capabilities.⁵⁰ As a result, the alliance system under the current government administrations felt compelled to quickly return to a regular exercise schedule in an effort to strengthen deterrence and the public's confidence amid concerns that both had decreased in recent years.

Furthermore, the drastic policy shift from postponing or outrightly canceling exercises to reinstating them with an increase in frequency and scale creates a whiplash effect on the Korean Peninsula. This not only risks unintentionally heightening the DPRK's threat perception of a coming shift in alliance intentions but also may be perceived by the public and international community as unnecessarily raising tensions between the Koreans. As such the US-Northeast Asia alliance system should maintain a regular exercise schedule to credibly message its military readiness to respond to DPRK-armed aggression. Doing so also should aid in preventing the perception that alliance exercises are used to punish the DPRK.

Overall, by implementing these measures surrounding the alliance system's responses to DPRK provocations and the system's military exercises, the system will be able to maintain its military readiness and strengthen deterrence and public confidence without risking regional stability.

US Intent

The reality of the US political system can challenge sustained alliance system strategic communication related to political willingness and military capability to respond to threats to other members of the alliance system. Resulting alliance mismanagement could undermine deterrence, thus risking the DPRK calculating it could conduct even limited armed aggression with impunity. For instance, there is concern that North Korea will soon move again to carry out limited armed aggression akin to its 2010 response against South Korea.⁵¹ This scenario harkens back to the Korean War, when

48. Jenny Town, "Has Conflict on the Korean Peninsula Become Inevitable," Arms Control Association, March 2024, <https://www.armscontrol.org/>.

49. Chung Min Lee and Kathryn Botto, eds., *Korea Net Assessment: Politicized Security and Unchanging Strategic Realities* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, March 18, 2020), <https://carnegieendowment.org/>.

50. Julia Masterson, "UN Experts See North Korean Nuclear Gain," Arms Control Association, September 2020, <https://www.armscontrol.org/>.

51. CNN Wire Staff, "North Korea Strike, South Korean Leader Threatens 'Retaliation,'" CNN, November 24, 2010, <https://www.cnn.com/>.

Kim Il Sung observed the US military drawdown from South Korea and the US government's proclaiming the South Korea was out of the US defense perimeter as indications that the United States would not come to its defense.⁵² Some DPRK experts even warn North Korea may attempt a quick seizure of ROK territory.⁵³

While the alliance system has made great strides in boosting security cooperation, those efforts may be in vain, absent credible indicators of enduring political support of the alliance's military aims, namely US security guarantees.⁵⁴ Discourse surrounding concerns of alliance system cohesion usually focuses on questions of whether the United States would be willing to risk its own security to come to the aid of its Allies. This debate intensifies as North Korea comes closer to a nuclear-strike capability against the US homeland, in an effort to deter the United States from responding to a limited DPRK attack against South Korea. A failure to adequately message the endurance of alliance cohesion and particularly the US commitment to its security guarantees poses risks to deterrence and public reassurance.

Furthermore, a failure to credibly message the endurance of alliance cohesion risks undermining the public confidence that the alliance has the political will and military capability to respond to armed aggression should deterrence fail. In particular, different US administrations over the years have pushed to reduce US military presence in Ally and partner countries, assessing that lessening the threat posed to US interests means decreasing the number of US citizens in harm's way.⁵⁵

Concern over the endurance of the US commitment is complicated by North Korea's pursuit of its nuclear capabilities and the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine, which has incited ROK citizens' desire for their own indigenous nuclear weapon capability. If met, this will likely further destabilize Northeast Asia through the heightened threat perception of all of South Korea's neighbors.⁵⁶

Thus the United States has been working with South Korea toward better consultation on nuclear threats, and there has been an increase in trilateral security cooperation toward DPRK missile threats.⁵⁷ In addition there are nascent indications that the nuclear consultation could eventually include Japan.⁵⁸ Efforts in these areas will be in vain if there is not a sustained political commitment to current US strategic messaging,

52. Thomas J. Christensen, *Worse Than a Monolith: Alliance Politics and Problems of Coercive Diplomacy in Asia*, Core Textbook ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).

53. "Predicting 2024: Why the Writing Is on the Wall for an Inter-Korean Border Clash," NK Pro, January 10, 2024, <https://www.nknews.org/>.

54. White House, "The Spirit of Camp David: Joint Statement of Japan, the Republic of Korea, and the United States," press release, August 18, 2023, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/>.

55. Veronica Stracqualursi, "Trump Apparently Threatens to Withdraw US Troops from South Korea over Trade," CNN, March 16, 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/>.

56. Foster Klug, "South Koreans Want Their Own Nukes. That Could Roil One of the World's Most Dangerous Regions," AP, November 29, 2023, <https://apnews.com/>.

57. White House, "Camp David."

58. Ji Da-gyum, "S. Korea Open to Japan Joining Nuclear Consultative Group: Ex-Security Advisor," *Korea Herald*, February 13, 2024, <https://m.koreaherald.com/>.

even across different presidential administrations, regarding an enduring commitment to security guarantees in the region.⁵⁹

Congressional and administration internal strife has, among other things, delayed military aid to US partners embroiled in armed conflicts, most recently to Ukraine and to Israel. Decisionmakers persistently hamstring policy for the sake of unrelated policy issues.⁶⁰ Some may be quick to assume that the United States would approach armed aggression against US treaty allies differently. But it is unknown whether North Korea views the US approach to treaty allies and nontreaty partners differently. Unfortunately, absent acknowledgement by the opponent, deterrence effectiveness can only be measured if it fails.

Moreover, the almost 30-year congressional preference for continuing resolutions—1997 was the last year without at least one—has exacerbated the tendency toward sustained impasse on important issues.⁶¹ Defense Secretary Lloyd J. Austin has warned how the constant threat of extending these resolutions impacts military readiness.⁶² Michele Flourney, former US under secretary of defense for policy, has consistently noted that operating on continuing resolutions prevents the United States from modernizing outdated and inefficient systems and forestalls the funding of new defense articles to meet emerging threats.⁶³ North Korea and US Allies take note, thereby undermining deterrence and public reassurance.

In particular, policy instability hampers the US-Northeast Asia alliance system's messaging efforts that it has the political will and military capability to respond to armed aggression. Prioritizing US political party interests over national security interests risks eroding deterrence and public reassurance and weakens the long-term credibility of US security guarantees.

Conclusion

The US-Northeast Asia alliance system's leadership has not provided any indication that it assesses North Korea intends to go to war. Yet, decisionmakers cannot rule out an inadvertent escalation in tensions, nor can they rule out North Korea's calculations that it could carry out even limited armed aggression with impunity.

59. Kate Sullivan, "Trump Says He Would Encourage Russia to 'Do Whatever the Hell They Want' to Any NATO Country That Doesn't Pay Enough," CNN, February 11, 2024, <https://www.cnn.com/>.

60. Morgan Chalfant, "McConnell Threatens Semiconductor Bill, Prompting White House Rebuke," *Hill*, June 30, 2022, <https://thehill.com/>; and Stephen Groves et al., "Senate Republicans Resist Advancing on Border Policy Bills, Leaving Aid for Ukraine in Doubt," AP, February 7, 2024, <https://apnews.com/>.

61. James V. Saturno et al., *Continuing Resolutions: Overview of Components and Practices*, R46595 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, May 16, 2023), introduction, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/>.

62. Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin to Senate Majority Leader Charles Schumer, letter, November 27, 2022, <https://www.airandspaceforces.com/>.

63. Kedar Pavgi, "Former Defense Official Calls Congressional Paralysis a Threat," *Government Executive*, October 17, 2012, <https://www.govexec.com/>.

The geopolitical environment in Northeast Asia is particularly tense. North Korea has severed communication channels with the US-Northeast Asia alliance system, which means direct communication amid a crisis to prevent escalation may be unlikely. In addition, considering the seeming lack of avenues for great power cooperation with North Korea, the alliance system's strategic communication is increasingly important to maintaining crisis stability.

With limited avenues to impact North Korea's strategic calculus, the alliance system should avoid responding to provocations that are not an immediate threat, and should look for ways to more clearly message North Korea and the international community regarding routine alliance system military exercises. Furthermore, while the return to full-scale exercises and trilateral security cooperation aids in strengthening deterrence, it should be done in a manner that improves military readiness without risking inadvertent escalation.

Lastly, members of both parties in Congress and the presidential candidates should prioritize a consistent message of unflinching, meaningful support to the alliance system. Failing to do so risks undermining deterrence and public confidence in US security guarantees. Æ

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