

As North Korea Resumes Provocations, the U.S. Should Stand Firmly with Its Allies

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

Pyongyang is once again implementing a deliberative and incremental program to raise tensions.

North Korea's vows to redeploy military units and recommence military activity near the DMZ should trigger allied deterrent responses.

The U.S. should make clear to allies and adversaries that it stands with South Korea and Japan in facing growing threats in Asia.

On June 16, North Korea dramatically carried out its vow to sever all communication links with South Korea by blowing up the inter-Korean liaison office in Kaesong. While visually provocative, the petulant move was merely symbolic, since Pyongyang had eschewed all South Korean attempts at dialogue, and the liaison building has been dormant since January.

Pyongyang is once again implementing a deliberative and incremental program to raise tensions while, for now at least, being careful not to trigger strong allied responses. The regime seeks economic benefits and sanctions reductions by warning of additional harsh measures that it conditionally links to South Korean actions. North Korea's vows to redeploy military units and recommence military activity near the demilitarized zone (DMZ) should trigger allied deterrent responses that were put on hold in a failed effort to induce diplomatic progress.

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Blowing Up Engagement

North Korea broke the quiescence of recent months with a flurry of invective-laden diatribes against Seoul and Washington. Doing so on the anniversaries of the first U.S.–North Korea summit (2018) and the first inter-Korean summit (2020) was particularly peevisish. Pyongyang ostensibly used leaflets sent into the North by South Korean pro-democracy groups as justification, but stated that the regime had been thinking for some time of taking “decisive measures to fundamentally remove all provocations from the south.”¹

Beyond destroying the liaison office, North Korea cut all communications with Seoul, including senior-leader links between the South Korean presidential Blue House and North Korean Central Committee, as well as military hotlines intended to defuse situations in the East and West Seas. The regime declared it would scrap the 2018 inter-Korean Comprehensive Military Agreement (CMA), which South Korean President Moon Jae-in hailed at the time as a major step in improving relations with Pyongyang. North Korea’s actions are a major setback for Moon, who invested great political capital in improving relations with Pyongyang. The regime is revoking Moon’s signature achievement, despite Seoul’s repeated attempts to offer concessions.

North Korea is seeking to induce further concessions and benefits from the Moon Administration, which is increasingly desperate to salvage inter-Korean relations. The Moon Administration quickly capitulated to North Korean demands to take action against the democracy groups.

While admitting that the activists were exercising their right to free speech, Seoul declared the pro-democracy leaflets were “harmful to national security” and introduced legislation to “crack down” on the activity. One proposed bill would criminalize sending leaflets by up to seven years imprisonment for “anti-North hostility” in the border area.²

Remilitarizing the DMZ

North Korea announced several planned military deployments. Pyongyang vowed to send regiment-level military units to the former inter-Korean economic ventures at Mount Kumgang and the Kaesong Industrial Zone and return guard units to DMZ locations vacated under the inter-Korean CMA. Additional artillery units would bolster existing forces “on the whole front line,” including the southwest naval front, the site of the deadly November 2010 artillery attack on South Korea’s Yeonpyeong Island. This could include several new, more capable weapons systems revealed in 2019.

There have been several military clashes along the Northern Limit Line (NLL), which serves as the disputed maritime boundary in the West Sea. North Korea pledged to resume all kinds of military exercises in the areas close to the boundary. In a new development, “areas favorable for scattering leaflets against the south will open on the whole front line” with the activity protected by the military. North Korea warned that “our military’s patience has run out” and additional retaliatory steps could go “far beyond imagination.”³

North Korea may even be hinting at taking action against North Korean defectors or activist groups in South Korea. Pyongyang declared they had “committed hostile acts against the DPRK [Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, or North Korea] [by hurting] the dignity of our Supreme Leadership”⁴ and should “pay the dearest price for their crimes.”⁵ The regime takes any insult to the leadership quite seriously, having declared the farcical movie *The Interview* an act of war and warned it would conduct “9/11 style attacks” on any theater showing it.⁶

Pyongyang has previously planned and carried out assassinations of defectors in South Korea. The regime has taken particular umbrage at two defectors recently elected to South Korea’s National Assembly.

Growing Potential for Miscalculation

North Korea declared it will engage in a series of retaliatory actions with the blowing up of the liaison office as the “first stage step of the primary action.”⁷ Pyongyang added cryptically that the “solution to the present crisis...can be terminated only when the proper price is paid.”⁸ The regime added that it will condition the “intensity for carrying out successive action measures [and] time for decisive actions on the response of South Korean authorities.” But “reckless” actions by South Korea will trigger “tougher retaliation plans.”⁹

At this stage North Korea is ratcheting up tension to force economic benefits and reductions of sanctions. But the large-scale return of military units in close proximity along the DMZ and the volatile NLL area raises the possibility of clashes, even inadvertently, with South Korean forces. The State Department urged North Korea to return to diplomacy and improve inter-Korean relations, which earned a sharp rebuke by the regime. Pyongyang warned the U.S. it should not “poke its nose into other’s affairs with careless remarks [if] it doesn’t want to experience a horrible thing.”¹⁰

North Korea also referenced the U.S. presidential election again, hinting at stronger provocations unless the Trump Administration alters its North

Korean policy. Potential actions include the unveiling of a new missile-carrying submarine or a new intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM), or the launching of longer-range missiles, including an ICBM.

What Washington Should Do

While the current situation is predominantly inter-Korean, regime statements that the military will implement any steps should elicit strong U.S. support for its South Korean ally. To wit, the U.S. should:

- **Recommence Military Exercises.** Since the Singapore summit in June 2018, the U.S. and South Korea cancelled and constrained numerous military exercises.¹¹ The outbreak of COVID in South Korea led to further restrictions on military activity. The diminution of allied military exercises did not elicit any positive diplomatic momentum, nor any reciprocal reductions in North Korean military exercises. The two-year allied experiment was unsuccessful. It is time to resume the full exercises schedule—beginning with the Ulchi Freedom Guardian exercise in August.
- **Resume Rotating U.S. Strategic Assets to the Korean Peninsula.** At the request of the South Korean government, the U.S. stopped flying strategic bombers over the Korean peninsula.¹² General (Army Ret.) Vincent Brooks, former U.S. Forces Korea commander, commented that strategic assets such as nuclear-capable bombers, F-35 fighters, aircraft carriers, and submarines had not transited South Korea since 2018.¹³ He recommended restarting the rotational deployments as a deterrence measure and a signal of allied resolve.
- **Resolve the Stalled Special Measures Agreement Negotiations with South Korea.** The Trump Administration should abandon its demands in Special Measures Agreement negotiations for an exorbitant increase in South Korea's contribution to offset the cost of stationing U.S. forces and instead accept an incremental increase.¹⁴

Conclusion

North Korea's actions to date only moderately increase tensions. However, regime declarations of follow-on planned measures, as well as other potential provocations, could cause greater pressures and escalatory

responses. There should be no doubt in the minds of America's allies or adversaries that Washington stands shoulder to shoulder with South Korea and Japan in facing growing threats in Asia.

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