

KOREA CHAIR PLATFORM

Assessing the 2015 Spring Exercise Season: Trying Hard to Stick to Business

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The first week of March marked the start of Key Resolve (March 2-13) and Foal Eagle (March 2-April 24) which – together with Ulchi Freedom Guardian in the late summer – are the largest U.S.-Republic of Korea (ROK) joint military exercises held in South Korea each year. They consist of two separate drills, with Key Resolve involving computer simulations at the command level and Foal Eagle involving field-training exercises that combine air, land, and sea elements. The exercises have been conducted since 2002 in their current tandem form, (though Key Resolve until 2008 was referred to as Reception, Staging, Onward Movement, and Integration, or RSOI, which replaced the larger Team Spirit exercises in the 1990s). This year Key Resolve involved around 10,000 South Korean and 8,600 U.S. troops, while some 200,000 Korean and 3,700 American troops are participating in Foal Eagle.

Spring exercise season each year brings some fairly predictable behavior, prompting the baseline of U.S. and ROK tensions with North Korea to increase a few notches for the duration of the drills – like the peninsula's version of groundhog's day. Year after year, the U.S. emphasizes the routine, defensive nature of the exercises and stresses that they are not related to “current situations” on the peninsula or elsewhere in the world. In turn, North Korea, year after year, equates the exercises to war preparations for which it will retaliate (using different variants of more colorful language) and makes every effort to link the exercises to other issues.

The lead-up to exercises this year was no exception. In January, North Korea offered to suspend nuclear tests in exchange for halting the drills. The U.S. promptly rejected this offer as a “non-



starter,” with U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Daniel Russel stressing that the North has no right to “bargain, to trade or to ask for a payoff in return for abiding by international law.”¹ Pyongyang also attempted to establish the cancellation of the exercises as a precondition for inter-Korean talks, which South Korean President Park Geun-hye has urged in recent months as part of her broader policy to lay the groundwork for unification. Seoul dismissed this proposal, noting that “such issues need to be discussed at inter-Korean talks.”² Closer to the start of the exercises, North Korea conducted short-range missile tests and an island attack and seizure simulation near Yeonpyeong-do – the South Korean island in the Yellow Sea that North Korea shelled in 2010. These sorts of North Korean actions, while far from friendly, are not out of the ordinary for exercise season, which regularly involves Pyongyang’s own attempts to demonstrate capabilities alongside the U.S.-ROK exercises.

What to make of this cyclical posturing from both sides? Do these exercises – and the accompanying platform they provide for each side to dig in their heels on the issues of the day – merely play in repeat mode year after year? In short: no. A brief review of spring exercise season over the past two years reveals the extent to which these drills, despite the routine nature of basic playbooks, can be fairly consequential in either heightening hostility levels on the peninsula or scaling them down. In 2013, the exercises began in the midst of pitched tensions following North Korea’s third nuclear test. Pyongyang turned up the heat further in the early days of the drills, going beyond its usual rhetoric by declaring the 1953 Korean War armistice nullified and threatening a nuclear attack on the U.S. mainland. The U.S. countered with its own unambiguous escalatory signal: incorporating F-22 stealth fighter jets, B-2 stealth bombers, and B-52 bombers into the drills. Overall tensions remained higher than usual for a number of months, a period that U.S. officials referred to as the most dangerous since the Korean War.

The 2014 exercises, in contrast, began on the heels of the highest-level inter-Korean government meeting since President Park entered office and involved signaling of the opposite nature. During the first week of the drills, North Korea made the somewhat unexpected move of allowing reunions for family members separated since the Korean War to proceed (following threats to cancel them because of the exercises). President Park followed up with an announcement, also in the midst of the drills, that South Korea would work with Russia to develop rail and maritime links between Russia, North Korea, and South Korea. The U.S. also downscaled the military hardware involved in the exercises, excluding aircraft carriers and nuclear-capable strategic bombers.

What might we expect for the remainder of spring drill season in 2015? Looking back only two years and given the volatile nature of North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, it is difficult to make any definitive predictions. Yet the 2013 and 2014 spring exercise seasons suggest two takeaways that might help in assessing this year’s drills. First, the atmospherics surrounding the exercises for the past two spring seasons tended to reflect pre-existing moods in inter-Korean and U.S.-North Korea relations. The prelude to this year’s exercises brought a mixed bag. The two Koreas in February appeared to be moving, in fits and starts, toward a new set of official meetings and possibly a high level summit. On the other hand, U.S.-North Korea relations, in the wake of the Sony hacking incident and new sanctions, had seen better days.

Since the start of the exercises, Pyongyang has increased the tempo of its short-range missile tests, firing two short-range Scud-C type missiles into waters off its east coast on March 2,

followed by seven ground-to-air missiles with ranges up to 200 kilometers on March 12. As noted, North Korean short-range missile tests during U.S.-ROK exercises are not unusual. During the first week of the 2014 exercises, for instance, Pyongyang reportedly fired up to eight short-range missiles. Events in the coming weeks will help to determine the significance of the missile tests – as fairly routine drills or a prelude to more serious provocations. The March 5 attack by a South Korean citizen on U.S. Ambassador Mark Lippert provided North Korea with an opportunity to issue invective, but all signs indicate that the attack was the work of an individual, not the North Korean government.

The second takeaway from the previous two spring drill seasons is the way in which the exercises are managed can also play a key role in escalating or de-escalating tensions. The U.S. has not cancelled the exercises in response to North Korean requests since the 1990s. But it has used more subtle signals – scaling down drills in 2014, for instance, or minimizing their publicity, as it did with the Ulchi Focus Guardian exercise in August 2014 – to indicate openness to more cooperative relations.

What is the projection for this spring? One cannot rule out the possibility that North Korea will follow its recent missile tests with more serious escalations, like a long-range missile or nuclear test or a conventional attack along the lines of the 2010 Yeonpyeong-do shelling, always a possibility under Kim Jong Un. Barring these types of provocations, however, the remainder of this year’s drill season should look more like 2014 than 2013.

Overall, Key Resolve and Foal Eagle tend to churn up a broad range of issues beyond military exercises. But the U.S. and South Korea, for good reason, try to keep them as focused as possible on the business at hand: ensuring the joint readiness of U.S. and ROK forces to counter an ever-evolving North Korean threat. Fewer sideshows mean that systems, old and new, can be tested without distraction. This year the littoral combat ship USS Fort Worth, tailored for shallow coastal waters like those surrounding island flashpoints in the East and South China Seas, was incorporated into Foal Eagle for the first time. The results of this testing will have implications for U.S. and allied capabilities far beyond the peninsula. Let’s hope for a spring without fanfare.

¹ The Korea Times. “*Change in N. Korea does not mean regime change: senior U.S. diplomat.*” Posted Feb 5, 2015. http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2015/02/485_173053.html.

² The Korea Times. “*Gov’t rebukes NK preconditions for dialog.*” by Jun Ji-hye. Posted Jan 26, 2015. http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2015/01/116_172425.html.

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