

## U.S.-ROK Military Exercises: Provocation or Possibility?



Image Credit: U.S. Pacific Command  
Flickr Creative Commons

Joint military exercises between the U.S. and South Korea have been a longstanding component of the two countries' defense alliance. Though they are important for maintaining a deterrence, among a host of military, political, and diplomatic objectives, they are nonetheless viewed as a provocation by North Korea. This essay by Major General (ret.) Mats Engman, puts the military exercises into perspective and, in the emerging context of dialogue and reduction of tensions, suggests how they can be adjusted to support the positive momentum, without jeopardizing their key objectives.

Since the end of the Korean War the security dimension of inter-Korean relations has to a large extent been driven by nuclear deterrence and the development of their respective military capabilities. In more recent times, the two Koreas have been increasing their military capabilities in an asymmetric way. While the Republic of Korea (ROK) has sought to develop its conventional weapons and bolster its alliance with the U.S., North Korea has put more focus on developing its non-conventional weapons.

For South Korea, the defence alliance with the U.S. – based on the U.S.-ROK Mutual Defence Treaty signed in 1953 – is a central part of its defence policy. In turn, conducting combined and joint military exercises is an integral component of the defence treaty. Accordingly, the large-scale exercises have been, and continue to be, necessary to achieve the intended conventional deterrent and capability.

Over the years, several different types of large-scale military exercises have been conducted. But, since

1976, the U.S. and ROK have been focused on conducting two major annual exercises – the first being “Foal Eagle”, and the other being “Ulchi Freedom Guardian-UFG”, which was renamed “UFG” from “Ulchi Focus Lens” in 2007. The same year, another exercise called “RSO&I” (Reception, Stage, Onward movement and Integration) was renamed “KR” (Key Resolve), and since 2002, RSO&I/KR have been conducted in combination with Foal Eagle. Foal Eagle/Key Resolve normally takes place in early spring and Ulchi Freedom Guardian in early autumn. Both exercises are designed to meet their stated purposes of enhancing readiness, defending against possible North Korean aggression, protecting the region, and maintaining stability on the Korean Peninsula.

---

*Major General (ret.) Mats Engman is a Distinguished Military Fellow at ISDP.*

Foal Eagle is a combined field-training exercise that generally lasts up to two months. Currently one of the largest military exercises in the world, it involves several hundred thousand soldiers and civilian personnel. It is also a very complex exercise encompassing different types of smaller exercises in the air, at sea, and on land. Key Resolve is a computer-simulated command post exercise which employs modern simulation technology to train staffs at various levels using various scenarios and simulated events.

Ulchi Freedom Guardian is also a computer-assisted command post exercise and is arguably the largest computer-assisted simulation exercise in the world. All services – the army, navy, air force and the marine corps – are engaged in the exercise as well as civilian elements.

Over time, the exercises have naturally developed both in scope and in nature. The last decade has seen a more deliberate use of computer-assisted and simulated exercises. One reason for this, is that it is a cost-effective way of training, but it also somewhat reduces the negative perceptions among neighbouring countries of the “provocative” nature of the exercises. A more deliberate focus on aspects of crisis management and the role of the United Nations Command, have also been evident in the exercises during recent years.

The majority of soldiers and civilians participating in the exercises are from South Korea. Before 2009, most of the U.S. soldiers permanently deployed in South Korea were mobilized during Foal Eagle/Key Resolve. However, since 2010, they have also been mobilized during the Ulchi Freedom Guardian exercise. For both exercises, the U.S. normally brings in re-enforcements, which may vary in number. For instance, a sharp increase was noticeable for Foal Eagle/Key Resolve, from 12,300 in 2015 to 31,600 in 2017.

The variation in the number of soldiers participating in the military exercises can be explained by several different factors. Most likely, it is the result of different exercise objectives, modernization of capabilities and systems, and new units participating in the exercises. It may also be a reflection on the security situation at any given time, though this is less likely to be the case as participating in these exercises normally requires sev-

The **Institute for Security and Development Policy** is an independent, non-partisan research and policy organization based in Stockholm dedicated to expanding understanding of international affairs. For over a decade, ISDP has through its **Korea Project** provided a platform for discussion and debate between Northeast Asia experts focused on security issues on the Korean Peninsula. As such, it is committed to sharing different perspectives on important issues so as to enable constructive debate.

For enquiries, please contact: [info@isdpeu](mailto:info@isdpeu)

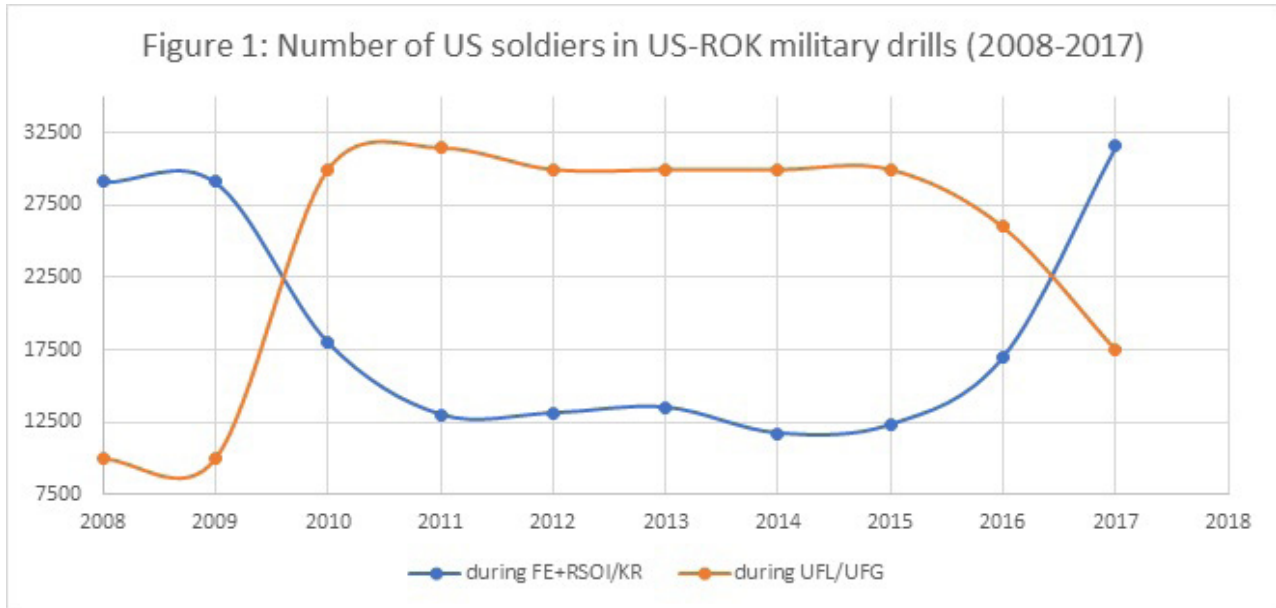
No parts of this paper may be reproduced without ISDP's permission.

**Disclaimer:** The opinions expressed in this paper are those of the authors only and do not necessarily reflect those of ISDP or its sponsors.

eral months of preparation.

The military drills, led by the ROK-U.S. alliance, are also joined by other nations, namely the 16 countries that participated in the Korean War under the UN Command (UNC) established in 1950. The Multi National Coordination Centre (MNCC) was created in 2009 to facilitate and provide a meaningful platform for the UNC Sending States to the drills. One aim of the UNC Sending States' participation in the exercises is to train for possible deployment of reinforcements to the peninsula and to train for the evacuation of their civilians living in South Korea. In this regard, participating nations can send civilians, observers, as well as military personnel.

As the deputy director of the MNCC in 2014, Colonel Chris Austin, stated: “In recent years, the Sending States have moved from observers and small contributions to a larger role.” Increased international participation has been most visible during the Ulchi Freedom Guardian exercise, which saw the involvement of as many as ten Sending States in 2014. By comparison, Foal Eagle/Key Resolve brought together six



sending states in 2016 and 2017. Among the Sending State nations, Australia, Canada, Denmark, the United Kingdom, France, Norway, and New Zealand have actively taken part several times, while Thailand, Italy, the Netherlands, as well as the Philippines have only participated once or twice.

These exercises, as well as the increasing participation of other nations, are an opportunity for the U.S.-ROK alliance to display a unified front to defend and support the ROK. Committed to this aim, the U.S. is also eager to bring in its strongest ally in the region, Japan. Unable to take part in the drills under the banner of the UNC Sending States, the U.S. proposed a trilateral military exercise on the Korean Peninsula involving the ROK, the U.S., and Japan. Accordingly, in 2016, they held their first trilateral anti-missile drill. However, tensions in ROK-Japan relations also pose limits, as evidenced in November 2017 when Seoul opposed Japan's participation in a navy exercise.

Traditionally the large-scale exercises have generated high tensions on the Korean Peninsula. While the U.S. and ROK present them as routine military exercises, purely defensive in nature and unrelated to current events occurring on the peninsula, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) typically denounces them as offensive and preparation for a disguised attack on the DPRK. The DPRK sometimes

even conducts missile tests in conjunction with the exercises, and engages in belligerent rhetoric threatening dire consequences should the military drills go ahead.

The DPRK is not the only country reacting angrily to the U.S.-ROK alliance exercises. China also criticizes the exercises as “provocations seen as a menace to the stability of the region.” In part as a response to the drills, Russia and China have conducted their own military drills. In December 2017, China conducted an exercise at the same time as the U.S. was deploying additional capabilities to the peninsula as part of exercise “Vigilant Ace” – another U.S.-ROK alliance air defence exercise. China is thus displaying a willingness to maintain some balance of power through these “counter-drills.” Russia also joined the Chinese initiative in September 2017, conducting the first bilateral military drill in the Sea of Japan and the Sea of Okhotsk with China.

Since 2010, with the approval of the “expanded tasks” which has seen it play an augmented role, the Neutral Nations Supervisory Commission or NNSC (consisting of Swedish and Swiss observers) is invited to observe the U.S.-ROK exercises, and is tasked with providing an independent, albeit confidential, report on the character of the exercises to the Commander of the UNC.

## Key Objectives

General Sir Rupert Smith writes in his book, *The Utility of Force*, that one thing that unites all military forces in the world is that “they kill and destroy.” One could also argue that another activity that all military forces have in common is that they train and exercise. Indeed, education and training are an every-day activity for all military forces, whether they be South Korean or North Korean. Education and training also serve many different purposes be they political, diplomatic, or military. By looking closer into these different dimensions, we may better understand the reasons for and nature of exercises.

### *Political*

From a political perspective one of the most important objectives with large-scale joint military exercises are that they demonstrate, and put into practice, the obligations and credibility of the U.S.-ROK alliance, thus ultimately contributing to deterrence. They also provide an opportunity for senior military and political leaders to engage in dialogue and discussions over difficult issues that they will eventually have to address in a real-world situation.

For senior military leaders, the exercises also contribute to an understanding and awareness of when, how, and what type of political “room for maneuver” the situation and the current political leadership requires and how this will impact on military operations. For senior political leaders, not normally focused on issues of the use of military force, it serves several purposes, including understanding the nature and limits of the use of military power as well as gaining familiarity with military decision-making processes and current operational plans.

During command post exercises, where different scenarios regarding particular events can be employed and which simulate and role-play an opponent’s actions, this political-military interaction can be of great importance. It also serves as a means of building and fostering personal relationships between senior officials, the need for which can be

hardly overstated in case of a serious crisis.

As any large-scale military confrontation on the Korean Peninsula would require the massive coordination and cooperation between the military and civil society, this is another important area for training and exercises. In modern urban societies, like that of South Korea today, any military confrontation will both be dependent on, and be limited in consideration for, civil society.

Ranging from considerations regarding the movement of troops versus evacuation of civilians from possible danger zones, to the protection of civilians and issues of support to and from civil society – many of these aspects require preparation for which the large-scale alliance exercises provide a unique opportunity in a realistic setting. This is important not only for the individuals taking part in the exercises on the ground, but are vital for the entire command organization, both military and civilian.

### *Diplomatic*

From a diplomatic perspective, a military exercise can also serve different purposes. It can be used for international outreach, offering a training opportunity to attract countries to participate. This may serve purely military purposes, but it may also be used as a confidence-building measure to develop or improve bilateral relations. To be able to attract other nations to participate also serves as a demonstration of international solidarity and support for the host country (which is the case for South Korea) and it may also increase the deterrent effect of the exercise.

A larger international participation in the exercises and the possible benefits this incurs, must of course in each case be balanced with possible issues of sensitive information being disclosed. But with wider international participation, one may also gain an improvement in educational effects and, indirectly, an increase in capability.

As mentioned above, one particular area of concern, if there was a case of a violent conflict on the Korean



Peninsula, would be evacuation of civilians. In particular, as a large military confrontation would most likely at an early stage have a severe impact on the metropolitan area of Seoul, much of the city's population – including its many foreign citizens – would need to be evacuated. With international participation, especially from countries with a significant number of nationals living in South Korea, these large exercises provide an excellent training platform for planning, coordinating, and testing various concepts for the evacuation of civilians.

Arguably most important, however, is that international participation gives an opportunity to train and exercise possible re-enforcements. This is especially significant in a situation where United Nations Security Council Resolution 84, adopted in 1950, is still valid. Accordingly, those countries part of the Unified Command may still be able and willing to support the command in case of a resumption of hostilities.

### **Military**

From a military perspective large-scale exercises have a multitude of different objectives. Field exercises, like Foal Eagle, are necessary in order to, in a realistic way, train commanders at all levels in leading military units, coordinating with other units, and exposing commanders and their staffs to the “frictions of war,” as Clausewitz explains. This is something difficult to achieve solely through simulation and computer-assisted exercises.

Additionally, large exercises are also used to test new equipment as well as new operational plans, with the overall objective of improving operational capability. For an alliance exercise, one key objective would also be to improve interoperability – that is, to improve the way two or more armed forces can operate together, by increasing understanding and harmonization of doctrines and tactics as well as technical interaction between various weapon-systems and platforms.

In the case of the U.S.-ROK exercises, they would also act as important opportunities to train and edu-

cate new personnel. The turn-over rate of military personnel is for most armed forces normally two to three years, and in the case of South Korea may be even higher. Any potential moratorium of exercises, as has sometimes been demanded by China and the DPRK, would therefore, quite quickly have an impact on the overall capability of the alliance.

Command post exercises, such as Ulchi Freedom Guardian, focus on training staff procedures, command and coordination, as well as crisis management. Indeed, the UFG series of exercises normally includes a crisis management phase, where the focus is on maintaining “armistice conditions” and, through well-calibrated military responses to various events, avoiding for as long as possible a full-fledged armed conflict from erupting. This part of the UFG exercise may be of particular value for international participation and for interacting with the political leaderships. In fact, during this author's time with the NNSC, there was notably more deliberate focus on this crisis management part of the exercise.

Furthermore, with the agreement in 2015, between the U.S. and the ROK, to change the previously agreed set date (December 31, 2015) for “Opcon transfer” to a “condition based” date, the large-scale exercises also play an important role in meeting some of these conditions. (“Opcon transfer” is the term used to describe the ROK resuming full operational control of the South Korean armed forces).

### **Current Situation**

Notwithstanding the importance of military exercises for the U.S.-ROK alliance and maintaining a credible deterrence, they cannot be separated from the vicious cycle of escalating tensions on the Korean Peninsula.

Since 2013, when DPRK conducted its third nuclear test, the overall security situation on the Korean Peninsula has become increasingly fragile. We have since witnessed three additional nuclear tests – the last coming in September 2017 – and close to fifty missile tests by the DPRK.

South Korea and the U.S. have over the same time-period demonstrated on several occasions some of the most advanced military capabilities through what is called “Strategic Deterrent Options-SDO,” and conducted several large-scale military exercises. Some of these Strategic Deterrent options have included displaying nuclear-capable platforms, like B-52 bomber aircraft.

When ROK President Moon Jae-in assumed power in May 2017, he declared a willingness to engage in dialogue with North Korea – a willingness that was met with silence until North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, in his New Year’s Address, surprisingly opened the possibility for dialogue along with the DPRK’s participation in the Pyeongchang Olympics.

As a consequence, the planned spring exercise Foal Eagle/Key Resolve was postponed until after the Olympic Games. During the Games we witnessed meetings between South and North Korean delegations, and Kim Jong Un invited both President Moon and President Trump for a summit meeting, which both have accepted. There would appear to be a positive momentum for a dialogue process between the DPRK and ROK, and even between the U.S. and DPRK.

How then can the planned resumption of joint military exercises support the positive momentum and prevent a re-escalation of tensions? In this context, demands for their termination or suspension are unrealistic, neither would it objectively change the threat perception of the DPRK, nor would it be acceptable to the U.S. and ROK. As already stated, the exercises serve several objectives which are defensive, transparent, and stabilizing. Importantly, any strong argument to halt the exercises would risk undermining the political support of President Moon domestically and endangers cohesion within the alliance.

More feasible, is to argue for an adjustment to the joint military exercises so as to demonstrate goodwill and to even use them as a confidence-building measure. It is important, however, that any changes made in regard to their scope, content and/or ob-

jective, do not jeopardize the key objectives of the exercises.

Some such “confidence building aspects” have already been introduced over recent years with a larger international participation. This could be continued and encouraged. In the current security situation, the participation of other nations besides the U.S.-ROK alliance, under the UNC framework, could contribute to transparency and trust building.

Moreover, as already highlighted, the “crisis management phase” of the UFG exercise has also been more pronounced in recent times. This phase could be further expanded and possibly also made more transparent. One way of doing this would be to invite not only representatives from the NNSC, but other international observers. A parallel could be drawn in this regard to the exercise observations included in the Vienna Document of the OSCE as a confidence building measure.

Another confidence-building measure worth considering is to inform the DPRK in a more detailed and formal way about the exercises, and to avoid making exaggerations over the scope and size of exercises. Such information sharing could preferably be done through a mutually agreed format, and by both parties.

Arguably more difficult, but still contributing to confidence building, would be, at least to some extent, to reduce the number of units and/or soldiers participating in exercises, to shorten the duration of exercises, and perhaps, at least as long as political dialogue is ongoing, to reduce or restrict the deployment of some of the more advanced, and in particular nuclear-capable, U.S. military assets in the exercises. To make such a deliberate and clearly communicated “restriction” with the purpose of contributing to the ongoing dialogue could be potentially important, without decreasing the deterrent effect, at least not in the short run.

In sum, the joint military exercises will remain a key and necessary component of the U.S.-ROK al-

liance. Calls to suspend the exercises would not, in the short run at least, objectively change the capability of the alliance. However, adjusting their scope and scale, in addition to making the exercises more transparent, could be viewed as a trust-building effort, to support the current peace dialogue.

*Major General (ret.) Mats Engman is former Head of the Swedish delegation to the Neutral Nations Supervisory Commission (NNSC). He recently joined ISDP as a Distinguished Military Fellow. Alice Privey, currently completing an internship at ISDP, contributed background research to this paper.*

## Endnotes

1. Time Kane, “Global U.S. Troop Deployment, 1950-2005”, *The Heritage Foundation*. 24 May 2006, <https://www.heritage.org/defense/report/global-us-troop-deployment-1950-2005> ; Defense Manpower Data Center, February 2017, [https://www.dmdc.osd.mil/appj/dwp/rest/download?fileName=DMDC\\_Website\\_Location\\_Report\\_1612.xlsx&groupName=milRegionCountry](https://www.dmdc.osd.mil/appj/dwp/rest/download?fileName=DMDC_Website_Location_Report_1612.xlsx&groupName=milRegionCountry)
2. “S. Korea, US to Begin Joint Military Drills Next Month”, *KBS World Radio*, February 24, 2015, [http://world.kbs.co.kr/english/news/news\\_Po\\_detail.htm?No=108855&id=Po](http://world.kbs.co.kr/english/news/news_Po_detail.htm?No=108855&id=Po)
3. Terri Moon Cronk, “U.S., South Korea Launch Annual Foal Eagle Exercise”, *Department of Defense news*, March 3, 2017, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Article/Article/1102331/us-south-korea-launch-annual-foal-eagle-exercise/>
4. “Sending States: The International Component of UFG”, *The United States Forces Korea*, August 28, 2014, <http://www.usfk.mil/Media/News/Article/600628/sending-states-the-international-component-of-ufg/>
5. “Sending States: The International Component of UFG”, *The United States Forces Korea*, August 28, 2014, <http://www.usfk.mil/Media/News/Article/600628/sending-states-the-international-component-of-ufg/>
6. Terri Moon Cronk, “U.S., South Korea Begin Annual Large-Scale Exercises”, *Department of Defense News*, 7 March 2016, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Article/Article/687679/us-south-korea-begin-annual-large-scale-exercises/> ; Sam LaGrone, “Carrier USS John C. Stennis Arrives in Korea For Port Visit, Exercises”, *US Naval Institute News*, March 14, 2016, <https://news.usni.org/2016/03/14/carrier-uss-john-c-stennis-arrives-in-korea-for-port-visit-exercises>

7. Staff Sgt. Benjamin W. Stratton, “Key Resolve Reaffirms Strategic U.S.-ROK Alliance”, *US Pacific Command*, March 24, 2017, <http://www.pacom.mil/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/1130172/key-resolve-reaffirms-strategic-us-rok-alliance/>

8. Prashanth Parameswaran, “US, Japan, South Korea Conduct Joint Missile Drill”, *The Diplomat*, June 30, 2016, <https://thediplomat.com/2016/06/us-japan-south-korea-conduct-joint-missile-drill/>

9. Hiroshi Minegishi, “South Korea rejected Japan involvement in joint US military drills”, *Nikkei Asian Review*, November 13, 2017, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics-Economy/International-Relations/South-Korea-rejected-Japan-involvement-in-joint-US-military-drills>

10. Neil Connor, “China stages drills in warning to US and South Korea amid nuclear tensions”, *The Telegraph*, December 5, 2017, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/12/05/china-stages-drills-warning-us-south-korea-amid-nuclear-tensions/>

11. Alex Lockie, “China did something it’s never done before to warn the US about fighting North Korea”, *Business Insider Nordic*, December 5, 2017, <http://nordic.businessinsider.com/china-north-korea-air-military-exercise-us-2017-12?r=US&IR=T>

12. Tom Batchelor, “North Korea: Russia and China carry out military drills close to border”, *The Independent*, September 18, 2017, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/north-korea-latest-russia-china-military-drills-us-trump-close-border-a7953506.html>

13. Smith, Rupert, *The Utility of Force: The Art of War in the Modern World*, (London: Penguin Books, 2006)

## Figure Reference

Figure 1:  
Data from US Army; US Department of Defense; United States Forces Korea; Stars and Stripes; US Pacific Command