



## SOUTH KOREAN MILITARY PREPAREDNESS IN THE SHADOW OF THE PANDEMIC

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*The Covid-19 pandemic is impacting both the preparedness of the South Korean military and its cooperation and coordination with American forces on the Korean Peninsula. Nonetheless, the military preparedness of South Korea and the combined defense structure is basically sound, and the South Korean armed forces have successfully adapted to the pandemic. Also, and most importantly, the ROK / U.S. alliance has demonstrated an ability to cope with the challenges of the present situation.*

### **Understanding Military Training on the Korean Peninsula**

On the Korean Peninsula, the Republic of Korea Army (ROKA) and U.S. Forces Korea (USFK) have a separate training program for each national army services. Added to this are combined exercises and training events. Training is split into small-unit and large-unit training. Small unit training is divided into individual and team training. Usually, small-unit training occurs at the battalion level or below. Large-unit training refers to combined arms training; two or more branches of service conducting training such as infantry, armored, and artillery units training together. Large units are usually from regiment or brigade to Corps level units.

This type of tactical-level training is conducted by each nation separately with the South Korean and U.S. Air Forces conducting air operations and the

South Korean and U.S. navies conducting maritime operations as the exception. Recently, with the transformation of the U.S. 2nd Infantry Division into a Combined ROK-U.S. Division with a standing staff of Korean and U.S. members, ground units have been conducting habitual tactical training at the battalion, and below levels, that enhances combined maneuver and operations capability.<sup>1</sup>

A military exercise or war game is the employment of military resources in training for military operations, either exploring the effects of warfare or testing strategies without actual combat. This also serves the purpose of ensuring the combat readiness of garrisoned or deployable forces prior to deployment from a home base. War games involving two or more countries allow for better coordination between militaries, observation of enemy's tactics, and serve as a visible show of strength for the participating countries.<sup>2</sup>

## Combined Training, Exercises, and Events in Korea

At the strategic or theatre level, two major combined exercises are normally conducted annually by the U.S. and South Korea, Exercise Foal Eagle in the spring and the Ulchi Freedom Guardian exercise in the fall. Foal Eagle (Korean: 독수리 연습) is a combined field training exercise (FTX) conducted annually by the Republic of Korea Armed Forces and the United States Armed Forces under the auspices of the Combined Forces Command. It is one of the largest military exercises conducted annually in the world.

***In a surprise announcement, U.S. President Donald Trump declared a unilateral cessation of these two exercises after the summit in Singapore on June 12, 2018.***

Ulchi-Freedom Guardian (Korea: 을지 프리덤 가디언) is the name (as of 2015) of the military exercise previously known as Ulchi-Focus Lens, a combined military exercise between South Korea and the United States. The exercise is the world's largest computerized command and control exercise, which involved 50,000 South Korean troops alongside 17,500 U.S. troops in 2017. It mainly focuses on defending South Korea from a North Korean attack. The exercise was initiated in 1976 and is conducted annually during August or September.

The goals of both these exercises are to practice staff procedures and improve standing operational procedures. This is especially important because of the high turnover rate for both the ROK and U.S. personnel stationed in Korea. The exercise usually starts with a series of briefings and educational

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events to improve the understanding between the South Korean, United States, and other sending-state participants, the United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia, among others.

The exercise climax is a two-week computer-generated portion where all personnel is deployed to their wartime locations to test the actual communications that would be used in a contingency; secure email, teleconference, video conference, and theater-level coordination efforts to share real-time information and to make time-sensitive decisions. This is referred to as the command post exercise (CPX) portion of the exercise. Concurrent with these activities, tactical units time their training with these major exercises and conduct some of the missions laid out by the CPX part of the exercise. Air and naval operations involving aircraft and seaworthy ships as well as ground infantry divisions maneuver during this field training exercise (FTX).

The exercise is defensive in nature; it is a response to an external attack, not a first strike operation. Both exercises are under the scrutiny of the Neutral Nations Supervisory Commission (NNSC). The Neutral Nations Supervisory Commission was established by the Korean Armistice Agreement signed 27 July 1953, declaring an armistice in the Korean War. The NNSC is, together with the United Nations Military Armistice Commission (UNCMAC), part of the mechanism regulating the relations between the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK)

and the Republic of Korea. The UNCMAC notifies the Democratic People's Republic of Korea and the North Korean People's Army (NKPA/KPA) of these exercises well before their execution and the NNSC oversees the exercise's defensive nature and non-aggressive prosecution, and eventually reports its findings to the UNC.

In a surprise announcement, U.S. President Donald Trump declared a unilateral cessation of these two exercises after the summit in Singapore on June 12, 2018. This decision also affected the air and naval exercises that were carried out in the Korean Peninsula. Since the cancellation of these exercises, the U.S. and South Korean militaries have conducted scaled-down military training to maintain proficiency and core capabilities through training opportunities to maintain the readiness of the force to deter and defeat external threats.

### **Impact of Covid-19 on ROK-U.S. Readiness**

United States Forces Korea (USFK), in conjunction with the South Korean military, had designed an exercise program that would follow the guidelines of the U.S. and Korean presidents before the outbreak of the pandemic. The concept was to tailor a flexible exercise to meet the situation with size, scope, volume, and timing. To meet the military requirements while at the same time adhering to the political context, the military commanders would be allowed flexibility regarding the size of an exercise. The exercise's scope could be tailored to the most senior commands and not include overseas units or units below the operational level. The normal advertisement of military events to assure the public could be toned down or not publicized at all. Finally, the traditional timing of these exercises could be rescheduled to create maximum effect with minimum diplomatic implications.

The severity of the threat that the Covid-19 pandemic poses had become apparent in South Korea by March 2020, one month before the spring training Command post exercise (CPX) event. This significantly reduced the participation of units and

personnel from off the Peninsula. Although all effort was made to minimize the negative effects on the readiness of the force, by remote participation, significant challenges still remained. Historically, USFK and the ROK Ministry of National Defense (MND) have been successful in developing mitigation measures to deflect any obstacles to meeting the objective of defending South Korea. Covid-19 mitigation efforts were in place by the fall training event, and the pandemic's surge was curtailed. Nonetheless, the previous levels were not achieved. Yet despite these limitations, the ability to deter and defeat external attack was maintained.<sup>3</sup>

***Lack of political leadership represents a more difficult, and chronic challenge to the readiness of ROK and U.S. forces on the Korean Peninsula.***

At the tactical level, all U.S. troops arriving in South Korea must adhere to a fourteen-day quarantine. This inhibits not only unit training and coordination efforts, but also ultimately affects the way readiness is maintained for U.S. units. For the South Korean units, the Covid-19 pandemic has similar consequences: ROK units are unable to conduct large scale unit exercises for fear of spreading the virus. Most unit training is either scaled down or replaced with virtual tools.

Moreover, the South Korean military is affected by the restrictions on the troops. South Korean troops are mostly conscripts, for whom leave, and furloughs are of particular importance. Yet the pandemic has led to the cancellation of leave as well as of visits by family members and friends. Also, the restrictions placed on officers and non-commissioned officers alike on daily family life have increased the stress level and ultimately affected the moral of the soldiers. Since October 2020, much of these restrictions have been lifted, but local commanders are nonetheless limiting furloughs to the very minimum. This also

impacts the economy of local communities, setting off a chain reaction of problems.

## Impact of Covid-19 on the Korean People's Army

Covid-19 represents an even greater challenge to North Korea, given the lack of modern medical facilities and preparedness. If the information released by the North Korean government is to be trusted, North Korea has no confirmed cases.<sup>4</sup> This would be highly surprising, but the extraordinary lock-down measures that have been imposed by North Korea may well have shielded the country from the virus. North Korean soldiers serve for extended periods in extremely closed and secluded environments and would have been easier to control than the South Korean troops. For example, the latter have a ten-day leave every twelve months and often receive quarterly leave as well as passes, while a North Korean soldier does not enjoy any furlough privileges at all during his decade-long service. Hence, unlike the South Korean military, a strict lockdown would not have affected morale among the North Korean troops.

The Korean People's Army (KPA), conducts its annual winter training cycle from December to the spring of the following year.<sup>5</sup> The 2020 Winter Training Cycle (WTC) will be the second WTC since the outbreak of Covid-19.<sup>6</sup> According to open sources, the 2019 WTC activities were more intense, and no sign of Covid-19 related restrictions were reported. Since then, North Korea has been implementing strict disease control throughout the country with shoot to kill orders to all border guards. It remains to be seen whether the KPA will conduct training as usual or adjust its training to the pandemic, during the upcoming Winter Training Cycle.

## Conclusion

The military preparedness of South Korea, as well as the combined defense structure, is sound, and the South Korean armed forces have successfully adapted to the pandemic. Also, and importantly, the ROK/U.S. alliance has demonstrated an ability to

cope with the challenges of the present situation.

However, lack of political leadership represents a more difficult, and chronic challenge to the readiness of ROK and U.S. forces on the Korean Peninsula. The will of the general public of South Korea to commit, not only money but also its continued support of universal military service and investments in modern weapon systems is in question. The South Korean public needs to appreciate better the stakes, and the political leaders in turn need to offer guidance that enables the public to make educated choices about its security.

The lessons from history are seldom wrong. *Si vis pacem para bellum*; if you want peace, prepare for war. ■

## Author Bio

Lieutenant General (Ret.) Chun is the Vice President of the Korea Freedom Federation. Moreover, he serves as Vice President of the Korea Chapter of the Association of the United States Army and MIG Alley Chapter of the U.S. Air Force Association, Advisory Member of the National Policy Planning Committee, and a Board Member of the Korean Animal Welfare Association.

## Endnotes

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