

Arms Tests vs War Drills Ad Infinitum in Korea

Tensions hardly rising but local and global drivers mean the tit-for-tat status quo will endure for the foreseeable future

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While real-life carnage unfolds across Ukraine, the phony war continues predictably on, around and above the Korean peninsula.

The actions of recent days may hearten jingoists and depress peaceniks on both sides.

On December 14, the US announced that a [Space Force command unit had stood up inside US forces based in South Korea](#). In Ukraine, the space domain has proven crucial, providing satellite data for Kiev's network-centric precision munitions.

On the same day, North Korea [tested a solid-fuel engine for its missiles](#) and on December 16 test-fired two medium-range [ballistic missiles](#). On December 18, it offered apparent proof – images of South Korean cities – of its [nascent reconnaissance satellite capability](#).

On December 20, [the US deployed B-52 strategic bombers and F-22 stealth fighters](#) to the skies just south of the peninsula to drill with South Korean F-35 and F-15 fighters.

For [headline writers](#) in [multiple media](#), these developments represent “rising tensions.” For cynics, they are signs that the peninsula's status quo drags on. For South Koreans, they are business as usual.

And don't expect any major change in the new year: There is more of the same to come.

Roll on 2023

On December 20, [South Korean Defense Minister Lee Jong-sup](#) said South Korea and the US will conduct 20 training exercises in 2023, including amphibious assault drills. The decision was taken to “expand the scale and types of combined field drills...in light of

advancing North Korean nuclear and missile threats,” Lee said.

[Seoul announced today that it is mulling major joint artillery drills in 2023](#) to mark 70 years of the bilateral alliance, which was signed as the smoke from the Korean War cleared in 1953. The last time such drills were held was in 2017.

Between 2018 and 2021, multiple training drills were put on hold under Seoul’s progressive Moon Jae-in administration. This happened, firstly, to enable diplomacy with North Korea, and, latterly, due to Covid-19 risks.

But under the conservative Yoon Suk-yeol administration, which took office in May, drills have restarted with a vengeance. While joint drills are essential to ensure military interoperabilities and overall credibility, they are a red rag to North Korea.

Pyongyang considers drills to be war preparations. The country has borrowed heavily from Soviet-Russian doctrine, and in February this year, Moscow did, indeed, use winter exercises to pre-deploy units for its Ukraine invasion.

Meanwhile, there are continued expectations among Pyongyangologists that North Korea will soon conduct what would be its seventh nuclear test – albeit, this alarm bell has been ringing constantly, and so far incorrectly, since the beginning of 2022.

At a time when differences between the authoritarian bloc and liberal democracies appear to be solidifying on the global chessboard, the peninsula’s status quo looks to be further cemented. Yet this dire outlook is not reflected in fear in South Korea.

All quiet on the Korean front

While generals, politicians and editors fret over “tensions,” nobody is digging bunkers behind South Korean apartment complexes, nor are shocks decimating South Korean capital markets.

“This is the unique nature of Korean society: We live right next to North Korea,” said **Chun In-bum**, a retired South Korean general. “It is like living next to a volcano, but if you don’t have the option to move, you just continue and hope for the best.”

“For the US, it is like a fire across the river – but that is different from your house burning,” Chun continued. “For South Koreans, it is such a nightmare that ignorance is bliss so we act as if nothing is wrong.”

Another Seoul resident agrees.

“There is proximity and geography and force deployed close together, with historical animosity – we live in the shadow of that,” said Dan Pinkston, an American international relations professor at Troy University.

But he added that he does not fear his home being hit by a missile: “It’s not so much tension, its clickbait,” he said.

In fact, one of North Korea’s recent developments might actually lessen tensions.

“If you look even at US analysts’ writings, they paradoxically say that North Korean spy

satellites might make the situation more stable,” said Andrei Lankov, a Russian specialist in North Korea who teaches in Seoul’s Kookmin University.

“North Korea is afraid of attack as they don’t get reliable intelligence in real-time so rely on agents who are unreliable,” Lankov explained. “If they have real reliable information, they are less likely to worry over sudden attacks so the chance of confrontation goes down.”

Still, Lankov admits that Pyongyang’s apparent advances in solid fuel engines increase risk.

Liquid fuel missiles need to be fueled up before being launched, providing defenders with both a warning and a window of opportunity to pre-empt them. Solid fuels lessen the vulnerability of a missile that requires time to take on propellant at or near its launch site before being fired.

Cold War 2.0

Outside the peninsula, virtually all indications are that the gap between the authoritarian bloc and the liberal democracies is widening to a chasm.

Moscow’s assault upon Ukraine has unified the Global North, with prosperous democracies as far distant from the action as Australia, Japan and South Korea joining North America and Western Europe in funneling aid and arms to Kiev.

Iran is providing direct military aid to Russia, indications are increasing that North Korea is supplying munitions and missiles, and China is providing diplomatic backing, if not more.

Meanwhile, the US, constantly fretting over a potential Chinese attack on Taiwan, is upping its semiconductor embargo on Beijing. As part of that chip war, Washington is rail-roading its allies into a struggle that could end up costing their chip companies scores of billions of dollars.

And Japan, after two years of discussion since abandoning its Aegis Ashore missile defense system in 2020, [last week formally announced plans to create a missile-based counterstrike force](#) to balance potential Chinese, North Korean and Russian threats.

Given these various signs of global bifurcation, up-arming and technological weaponization, there seems little likelihood that the Korean Peninsula – which was from 1950-53 the site of a civil war that spiraled into a murderous Cold War hot war – will break free of the wider trend.

That is true even though Pyongyang might like to widen its economic dependence beyond Beijing.

“The North Koreans would be far more comfortable outside the Chinese sphere of influence,” Lankov said. “But none of their opposite numbers is willing to make concessions strong and attractive enough for them to engage in negotiations.”

Amid this big-picture backdrop, the Korean peninsula remains a pivot point of compressed big-power confrontation. And stakeholders have selfish interests: The Kim regime seeks to entrench its survival while arms manufacturers benefit from the threat that the up-arming regime represents.

All this argues for a continuance of rising-falling tensions as North Korea hones its weapons and military systems, and for continued deterrence efforts as South Korea and the US shore up their alliance.

“The Korean peninsula is a microcosm but what are the choices? Appease, acquiesce, sign a peace treaty and give them what they want – or prepare for the worst?” Pinkston said of the conundrum facing strategists. “If liberal democracies did nothing and just took it on the chin, that would be unusual.”

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Featured image: Seoul lies within artillery range of North Korea – but remains largely indifferent to the threat. Photo: Andrew Salmon / Asia Times

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