

38 NORTH

SPECIAL REPORT

Conventional Threat Reduction on the Korean Peninsula

Toward a More Ambitious Agenda



Richard Sokolsky

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About the Author

Richard Sokolsky, currently a nonresident senior fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, worked in the State Department for six different administrations. During his tenure at State he was the director of the arms control office in the Bureau of Political-Military Affairs from 1990-1997 and a member of the Secretary of State's Office of Policy Planning from 2005-2015. He has also been a senior fellow at Carnegie, RAND Corporation and the Institute for National Strategic Studies at the National Defense University. His writings have been published in numerous outlets, including the Washington Post, the New York Times, Foreign Affairs, Foreign Policy, Politico, The National Interest, The Atlantic, CNN, and USA Today.

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Introduction

The failure of US President Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un at last week's summit to reach an agreement on denuclearization and steps to build a "lasting and stable peace regime" between the two Koreas, as called for in last June's Singapore Summit declaration, heightens the importance of North and South Korea making further progress in their efforts to create a comprehensive peace and security regime on the Korean Peninsula. Unfortunately, the Trump administration has sought to slow down this initiative, so it would not get in front of stalled US-DPRK denuclearization negotiations. With the prospect that these negotiations could be on a slow track for some time, the two Koreas, with the support of the US, should shift to a higher gear in their discussions on confidence building measures (CBMs) and launch a dialogue on conventional force reductions to further reduce the risk of war.

Peace vs. Denuclearization

The attention of the US media, nonproliferation experts, pundits and policymakers has been fixated on denuclearization; hardly any attention has been paid to conventional threat reduction and demilitarization of North Korea. This tunnel vision is short-sighted. A "bolt out of the blue" North Korean nuclear attack on the United States, which would be suicidal for the Kim dynasty and his country, is a fantastical scenario. The most likely trigger for any large-scale conventional conflict between North Korea and combined US/ROK forces, which could escalate to a nuclear exchange, has always been a local incident or accident that spins out of control.

If and when it occurs, positive movement towards North Korean denuclearization should not be conflated with progress toward building an enduring peace and security regime on the Korean Peninsula. The two are not the same. Capping and rolling back North Korea's nuclear weapons and ballistic missile capabilities are necessary for permanent peace on the peninsula and North-South reconciliation. But they are not enough. It is hard to visualize this end state if it does not include substantive CBMs to reduce the risk of surprise attack or an inadvertent conflict and reductions in and restrictions on the North Korean conventional forces.

Confidence Building Measures

In the early 1990s, North and South Korea held serious discussions about how to reduce military tensions through the negotiation of [CBMs](#). They agreed to resolve differences peacefully through dialogue and negotiation, pledged not to use force against one another, and established a North-South Joint Military Commission to discuss and implement steps to lower tensions and achieve conventional force reductions. These measures included the mutual notification and control of large-scale military maneuvers and exercises; the peaceful utilization of the demilitarized zone (DMZ); exchanges of military personnel and information; phased arms reductions; and verification of weapons destruction. Together, these steps would have significantly reduced the risk of surprise attack or a conflict arising from crisis, miscalculation, and miscommunication. For a variety of reasons, however, they were never implemented.

At last year's Pyongyang Summit, South Korean President Moon Jae-in and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un made significant progress toward lowering tensions, building trust, and reducing the risk of war on the Korean Peninsula, with a heavy emphasis on the two most serious flash points for conflict: The DMZ and the Northern Limit Line (NLL) in the West Sea (Yellow Sea). In a far-reaching [agreement](#) to implement the April, 2018 Panmunjom Declaration, North and South Korea agreed to: establish no-fly zones along the border and halt artillery and other military drills close to the DMZ; withdraw and eventually destroy all guard posts within the DMZ under agreed procedures for mutual verification; demilitarize the Joint Security Area in Panmunjom, including the removal of all mines; and create a [maritime peace zone](#) in the West Sea. Over the past five months, the two countries have made significant progress in implementing and verifying all these commitments, though important technical details, for example, the shape of the buffer zone the two sides agreed to establish in the West Sea, remain to be worked out. And real progress on resolving competing North and South Korean boundary claims in the West Sea remains elusive, creating the potential for a military incident like the one that happened recently over the disputed territory of Kashmir between India and Pakistan.

These CBMs are positive steps, but more can be done to protect both countries from an inadvertent conflict, surprise attack and the threat of a large-scale, deep conventional invasion. As the two countries gain more trust in each other—and confidence that the commitments they made in Pyongyang are being faithfully implemented—they should focus on more ambitious CBMs in two areas: 1) greater transparency and information sharing on military plans, programs, movements, and deployments; and 2) restrictions on peacetime military operations. Together, the measures outlined below, many of which are based on the CBMs that Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) countries agreed to in [Vienna Document 90](#), as well as those existing between India and Pakistan, would reduce both the risk of surprise attack and miscalculations or miscommunications that could trigger a crisis that might escalate into conflict.

Greater Openness and Transparency

A menu of options in this basket could include the following measures:

- Prior notification of an annual calendar of major military activities above a defined threshold and invitations to outsiders to observe and monitor these exercises under procedures established by the Inter-Korean Military Committee. These rules would alleviate fears of

North Korean use of major military exercises as a cover for an attack and mitigate the risk of US and ROK overreaction to or misunderstanding of major military movements.

- An annual exchange of military information on the command organization, location, personnel strength and major conventional weapons and equipment of active combat forces. Sharing this information could reduce uncertainty and alleviate fears about capabilities and intentions and create greater predictability.
- An exchange of information on defense policy, force planning, military budgets and procurements, and force modernization plans. As part of this dialogue, the two sides should also discuss how they might adjust defense spending and modernization to reduce the burdens of defense expenditures and make it more difficult to conduct short-notice, large-scale military operations.
- Reciprocal observer visits by military officers to military exercises, air bases and demonstrations of new weapons systems or equipment and more regular contacts between members of the North and South Korean armed forces. These measures would foster greater understanding and trust between the two militaries and potentially alleviate worst-case planning.
- Creation of joint aerial monitoring arrangements to verify mutual compliance with restrictions established on military activities in buffer zones on both sides of the military demarcation line. Such a scheme for unarmed aerial surveillance flights could be implemented under the auspices of the Inter-Korean Joint Military Committee and patterned after the [Treaty on Open Skies](#). Its geographic coverage eventually could be broadened to permit gathering of information about military forces and activities of concern to each party across their entire territory or to verify compliance with other CBMs that might be established.

Restrictions on Military Movements

Changing the way North Korean forces conduct peacetime operations and exercises—sometimes referred to as operational arms control—can reinforce greater transparency. Seoul and Pyongyang should consider the following measures:

- The establishment of “red lines” beyond which large military forces should not move; when developing this no-go zone, the two Koreas, taking geographic constraints into account (e.g., the proximity of the two capitals to the DMZ), should pull back their forces from the DMZ—40-50 km for the North and 10-20 km for the South. Any measures that push North Korean forces farther from the DMZ, especially artillery and other direct fire systems, would increase warning time of an attack and allow the Combined Forces Command (CFC) to better prepare for an attack. Pulling South Korean artillery back from their forward positions along the DMZ would also improve their survivability.
- The Inter-Korean Military Agreement signed in Pyongyang prevents exercises within 10 km of the DMZ. The two sides could extend the range of this ban; in addition, they could also agree to limit the duration of exercises and ban the use of live ammunition in them. These

measures would mitigate the risk of an incident that could spark a crisis as well as build greater mutual confidence in the peaceful intentions of both sides.¹

Rigorous Compliance

Ensuring that both sides fulfill the obligations they have incurred in the Inter-Korean Military Agreement is, in itself, an important confidence and trust building measure. The agreement to reinvigorate and elevate the Inter-Korean Joint Military Committee is a welcome step, but it needs to be given teeth to help ensure that agreements that are entered into are actually carried out. Thus, in addition to its enhanced role in military communications and crisis management, it should also be empowered to investigate charges that either side is violating the letter or intent of agreed upon CBMs and to enforce compliance with these measures by holding both sides accountable for violations.

Implementing measures that have already been accepted by the two countries is an important barometer of intentions and the credibility of commitments. Both sides should establish a solid record of compliance before they move forward with more ambitious plans for CBMs and actual reductions in or restrictions on the movement of conventional forces. The implementation of the Pyongyang Summit commitments is an encouraging development.

Conventional Arms Control

Conventional force reductions could play an important role in reducing not only tensions and the risk of inadvertent conflict, but also in making it more difficult for North Korea's Korean People's Army (KPA) to launch a devastating conflict.² The Pyongyang Summit and the improvement in inter-Korean cooperation provide a positive political atmosphere and thus an important opportunity to pursue more ambitious measures. The failure of the Hanoi Summit to impart momentum to the goal of creating a comprehensive peace and security regime on the peninsula adds even greater weight to the importance of getting conventional arms control discussions off the ground.

The overwhelming majority of North Korea's roughly 950,000 active ground forces are deployed in three echelons—a forward operational echelon of four infantry corps; a second operational echelon of two mechanized corps, an armor corps and an artillery corps; and a strategic reserve of the two remaining mechanized corps and the other artillery corps. These forces are garrisoned along major north-south lines of communication that provide rapid, easy access to avenues of approach into South Korea. The KPA has positioned massive numbers of artillery pieces, especially its longer-range systems, close to the DMZ that separates the two Koreas. This is a force that is structured for high-speed, large-scale offensive operations with little or no warning.

Over the past several years, North Korean officials have hinted that a transformational change in US-DPRK relations could pave the way for negotiations on conventional force reductions with South Korea. Both countries, in fact, have strong incentives to achieve this goal. Kim wants to reduce the overall size of his military to free up resources for development of the [civilian economy](#). Moon will face not only growing popular support for cuts in ROK defense spending if North-South reconciliation continues but also economic pressures. The South Korean population

is about to dramatically shrink. In anticipation of these demographic changes, the Moon government recently [announced](#) that it planned to cut 120,000 troops by 2022. Ideally, these reductions would be paralleled by comparable reductions in the size of the North Korean army.

The readiness and combat effectiveness of North Korean ground forces may have declined over the past decade due to maintenance and morale problems, and the quality of the North's mostly vintage Soviet-era equipment is outclassed by the far more sophisticated weapons systems operated by South Korean and US forces. But the North still maintains frightening short-warning invasion capabilities because of the thousands of artillery pieces, rockets and missiles that are poised to attack Seoul from just outside the DMZ. The North also possesses geographic advantages and has developed a broad range of military options as part of a larger asymmetric military strategy that leverages special capabilities like cyber weapons, special operations forces and electronic warfare.

Although South Korean forces enjoy qualitative superiority over North Korean forces in weapons/equipment, training and command and control, questions persist about the training, readiness and morale of ROK forces, and some experts worry about the "hollowing out" of the Army. Moreover, a large number of South Korean artillery pieces are deployed along the DMZ, and that makes them vulnerable to North Korean artillery pieces, which are all buried underground and outrange South Korean artillery pieces.

The North's military strengths and the South's military shortfalls notwithstanding, most experts believe that combined US and South Korean forces would ultimately prevail in an all-out conventional war with North Korea, but with horrific casualties and destruction of property. Such a war, moreover, significantly increases the risk of nuclear escalation, which would be catastrophic.³

In addition to geographic restrictions described above on where the North and South can station their forces, the two sides should also consider the elimination of major weapons and equipment. In the [Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe \(CFE\)](#), NATO and the Warsaw Pact set equal ceilings on key armaments essential for conducting surprise attacks and high-speed, large-scale offensive operations. The five major categories were: tanks, artillery pieces, armored combat vehicles, combat aircraft and attack helicopters. Because the Warsaw Pact had numerical superiority in all five areas, the reductions to equal ceilings had an asymmetrical impact on the forces of the Soviet Union and its allies.

To further limit the readiness of armed forces and thus their ability to mount large-scale attacks with little or no warning, the treaty: 1) set equal ceilings on equipment that could be deployed with active units and required that some ground equipment had to be placed in designated permanent storage sites; and 2) established regional limits to prevent destabilizing force concentrations of ground equipment. To meet required troop ceilings, equipment had to be destroyed or, if possible, converted to non-military purposes. The treaty also included unprecedented provisions for detailed information exchanges and on-site inspections and monitoring of destruction and conversion of treaty-limited equipment. A Joint Consultative Group was established to deal with questions related to compliance with provisions of the treaty.

North and South Korea should draw on the CFE experience if Pyongyang and Seoul continue to make significant progress on normalization and peace and security building. A notional force reductions scheme would consist of the following elements:

- The optimal step for the US and South Korea would be North Korean agreement to reduce its forces to levels equal to or possibly lower than the current total of South Korean and US forces across the same five categories embodied in the CFE Treaty. (See Figure 1 below.) This outcome would require highly asymmetrical North Korean reductions, and Pyongyang would almost certainly demand compensatory moves by Washington and Seoul to reduce those capabilities Pyongyang finds most threatening. Whether North Korea’s longer-range ballistic missile systems should be part of this equation will require careful study of the trade-offs that would be involved.
- The highest priority should be placed on eliminating North Korea’s massive edge in heavy artillery and short-range missiles and mortars (which would go beyond the CFE Treaty). Reductions in ground force capabilities, specifically heavy armor designed for deep penetration into South Korean territory, should also be accorded high priority.
- North Korean combat aircraft and attack helicopters are of much less military concern; in fact, the US and South Korea, if they’re looking for trade space, could offer asymmetrical reductions in these two categories—especially since aircraft moved off of the peninsula can be easily moved back in—to secure greater asymmetrical cuts in North Korean land forces.
- The US and South Korea, if necessary, could sweeten the pot by having the US take the greatest hit on combat aircraft, for example, by removing a tactical air squadron and making a token withdrawal of a ground force battalion (which could perhaps be re-located and forward deployed elsewhere in PACOM).
- Weapons and equipment would be destroyed or converted under agreed monitoring provisions to ensure that it could no longer be put to military uses. The ROK and perhaps the US could provide technical assistance to the North, if needed, to convert this equipment for use in the civilian economy.

Figure 1. Estimated Deployments of US, ROK, and DRPK Forces on the Korean Peninsula

	MAIN BATTLE TANKS	ARMORED PERSONNEL CARRIERS	HEAVY ARTILLERY (155mm+)	COMBAT AIRCRAFT	ATTACK HELICOPTERS	MILITARY MANPOWER (Active forces only)
NORTH KOREA	3,500+	2,500+	21,100+	545 ⁴	80+	1,280,000
SOUTH KOREA	2,614	2,790	4,238	603	96	625,000
UNITED STATES	140	170	70	81	70	28,500
COMBINED US/ROK FORCES	2,754	2,960	4,308	684	166	653,500

Sources: “The Military Balance 2018,” *International Institute for Strategic Studies*, 2018; and Anthony Cordesman, “The Military Balance in the Koreas and Northeast Asia,” *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, 2017.

North and South Korea have rebuilt a certain amount of trust as a result of President Moon’s “Nordpolitik,” and that has created a political climate conducive to agreement on threat reduction measures. That said, at present it remains uncertain how much appetite the North Koreans have for CBMs beyond what they agreed to in last September’s Comprehensive Military Agreement with the South—for example, observations of exercises, bases, and demonstrations of weapons systems—because it could expose North Korean weaknesses they would prefer to conceal. Similarly, North Korean thinking on conventional arms control is also opaque and there is no evidence that the South Korean government is thinking about structural arms control. It is certainly possible, when Seoul begins to debate the merits of arms control negotiations with the North, that it will have concerns about the impact of conventional force reductions on its ability to deter threats from North Korea and China.

Moreover, the US and South Korea will need to come to agreement on several important issues before further engaging with the North Koreans on more ambitious and militarily significant CBMs and conventional threat reduction measures that have the potential to impinge on US forces in the South. These include the pace at which negotiations on CBMs should proceed; the relationship between CBMs and arms control talks and US-North Korean negotiations on denuclearization—specifically, whether the two processes should be linked or proceed independently of one another; the implications of different CBMs and conventional force reduction options for US and ROK planning for the defense of South Korea against a North Korean attack; the timing and sequencing of discussions on CBMs and conventional force reductions, i.e., whether talks on these two baskets should be held sequentially or simultaneously; and lastly whether there is a role for third-party involvement in verifying, monitoring, or implementing CBMs and conventional force reductions. All these issues underscore the importance of close US-ROK consultations.

Conclusion

CBMs and conventional arms control measures, if properly crafted, would significantly mitigate the risks of a large-scale, surprise attack by North Korea as well as the danger that an incident, accident or miscalculation could spark a crisis and increase the risk of military escalation. Until there is a true transformation in North-South relations and an effective peace and security regime on the Korean Peninsula, CBMs and arms reductions would constitute an effective hedge against a return to tensions and confrontation between the US and North Korea or the collapse of the US-North Korean diplomatic process. The US should encourage further North-South progress on tension and threat reduction measures, while Washington and Seoul forge a consensus on future conventional force reductions and their implications for the future of both US force structure, operations, and planning for the defense of the peninsula and, more broadly, the US-South Korean alliance—the subject of the next installment in this special report series.

Endnotes

- ¹ For further discussion of CBMs for the Korean Peninsula, see: Paul K. Davis, “A Conceptual Framework for Operational Arms Control in Central Europe,” Research Brief, *RAND Corporation*, 1989, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_briefs/RB7802.html; Yong-Sup Han, “Peace and Arms Control on the Korean Peninsula,” *International Journal of Korean Studies* 5, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2001); and Colonel Hyon Kim, “Arms Control in the Korean Peninsula,” Research Report, *Air War College*, May 1986.
- ² Yong-Sup Han, Paul K. Davis, and Richard Darilek, “Time for Conventional Arms Control on the Korean Peninsula,” *Arms Control Today* 30, no. 10 (December 2000.)
- ³ A comprehensive assessment of the North-South military balance is beyond the scope of this paper. For an in-depth look at this subject, see: Anthony Cordesman, “The Military Balance in the Koreas and Northeast Asia,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, January 2017.