

KOREA CHAIR PLATFORM

Do U.S.-ROK Military Exercises Provoke the DPRK?

By Victor Cha

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On August 17, the annual U.S.-ROK military exercise Ulchi Freedom Guardian (UFG) will begin in South Korea for ten days. UFG is a computerized command-and-control exercise focused on simulating how the U.S. and the ROK would defend against a North Korean invasion, and normally involves 50,000 ROK troops, and 30,000 U.S. soldiers. UFG, together with the Key Resolve/Foal Eagle military exercise in the spring, are the largest combined and joint defensive training exercises in South Korea each year. These exercises also serve as platform for North Korean charges of U.S. and ROK aggression and fiery rhetoric, if not belligerent actions. North Korean reactions have caused some to label the US-ROK exercises, which are necessary to maintain readiness and deterrence, as "provocative" and spoilers for diplomatic progress.

The CSIS Korea Chair conducted a study in March of this year to see whether U.S.-ROK military exercises are "provocative" in the sense that they always lead to negative North Korean responses, worsening relationships, and increased tension on the Korean Peninsula. The scope of the study was ten years of U.S.-ROK military exercises (2005-2014), and we looked specifically at the Key Resolve/Foal Eagle military exercises. Here is what we found;

Null effect – U.S.-ROK military exercises have a null effect in the overall U.S.-DPRK diplomatic relationship. They are not game-changers. The past ten years of exercises demonstrated a rough correlation with the status of bilateral relationship prior to the exercises. If US-DPRK relations were coded positively prior to the exercises, it remained positive after the exercise, despite North Korean rhetoric on the contrary. On the other hand, if the relationship was coded negatively prior to the exercises, the exercises tended to reinforce the negative relations in terms of both rhetoric and possible provocations.

Split personality – Pyongyang can compartmentalize its reactions to US-ROK exercises. The regime is able to insulate positive inter-Korean relations from its belligerence against the U.S. during the exercise period. In 2005 and 2006, for example, relations between Seoul (under a progressive government) and Pyongyang remained good despite belligerence against the military exercises.

Length matters – As the duration of exercise have grown longer – beginning in 2009 when it first became multi-week – the window of opportunity for kinetic North Korean responses has also widened in periods that show correlation between negative pre- and post-exercise diplomatic relations. Small scale provocations during and after the exercise period became more common after 2009.

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Listen carefully – Pyongyang’s official rhetoric remains a good indicator of possible small-scale provocative actions during the exercise period. Washington and Seoul would do well to listen carefully to Pyongyang’s rhetoric in the coming days for potential actions.

*The CSIS *Korea Chair Platform* “Exactly How Provocative are U.S.-ROK Military Exercises?” is available online [here](#).

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