ROK-US Cooperation in Deterring North Korea’s Military Threat

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Abstract

After North Korea’s missile launch on April 13, 2012, uncertainty in the security environment on the Korean peninsula is at its height. Therefore, it is timely and important to examine potential military threats from North Korea and the countermeasures that the ROK and the US should prepare. This paper aims at studying the nature of North Korea’s military threats and various types of provocations and analyzing ROK-US cooperation to deter North Korea’s provocative actions. First, this paper points out that North Korea has been utilizing provocations to help secure its regime survival, and presents the escalatory nature of North Korean military provocations. Next, it examines changes of North Korea’s strategy and analyzes North Korea’s military options. It categorizes various aspects of North Korea’s provocations according to the type (non-collision and collision) and the level (low-intensity and high-intensity) of incidents. Lastly, this paper addresses the issues of extended deterrence and stressed ROK-US cooperation with policy suggestions for the ROK and the US.

Keywords: North Korea, Military, Deterrence, Provocation, Cooperation

I. Introduction

Since Kim Jong-Il’s death,1) North Korea, under the new leader Kim Jong-Un, has increased the level of criticism towards the Republic of Korea (ROK). North Korea’s missile launch on April 13, 2012, has raised anxiety levels on the Korean Peninsula and, consequently, uncertainty in the security environment is at its height on the Peninsula. What developments will take place in regard to peace and stability

on the Korean Peninsula under the Kim Jong-Un rule? Much will be decided by Kim Jong-Un’s decision. Will Kim Jong-Un continue to threaten the ROK? Or, will he give up the military threats and North Korea’s nuclear program to reform and open up North Korea? Unfortunately, considering Kim Jong-Un’s actions until now, tension on the Korean Peninsula will likely continue for a while.

If North Korea should resort to military threats, the ROK will seek to maintain peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula by responding to military threats on the basis of the ROK-US alliance. Both the ROK and the US have already agreed to take joint military actions against North Korea’s local military provocations and implement extended deterrence against North Korea’s WMD threats. It is timely and important to examine North Korea’s military threats and the countermeasures and task of the ROK and the US.

To recognize the changes in threat posed by North Korea and to seek appropriate measures to respond to the threat, this paper will first study the nature of North Korea’s military threats and possible types of provocations as of today and review ROK-US cooperation to deter North Korea’s military provocations. In conclusion, this paper emphasizes the need to continuously strengthen the ROK-US alliance particularly regarding the extended deterrence and the importance of investment in defense by the ROK government.

II. North Korea’s Military Threat

1. The Nature of the North Korean Military Threat

North Korea has continued posing military threats against the ROK since the two Koreas were divided. There is the inherent problem that North Korea is a failing state, and its failures are challenging the regime while North Korea’s number one priority is its regime survival. This has incurred North Korea to take a number of extreme actions. All the while, North Korean military provocations have put intense political pressure on the ROK government. Hoping to deter North Korea’s provocations and thoroughly retaliate against any type of provocative actions, the ROK government has declared its intention to take strong military actions in response to any military provocations in the future. However, if such warnings do not deter North Korea, they have the risk of inducing more serious military conflicts between the two Koreas. In this case, even the possibility of an escalation to a major war cannot be ruled out.

North Korea has been utilizing provocations to help secure its regime survival.