On March 15, 2021, Kim Jong-un’s sister, Kim Yo-jong, issued a statement condemning the staging of scheduled joint military exercises by the United States and ROK. She stated that whether or not relations between the DPRK and South Korea “return to the new starting point of peace and prosperity as witnessed in those spring days three years ago” depended on the attitude of ROK leaders.

According to the document, there were 110 war drills of varying scales in 2018, “more than 190 in 2019 and over 170 in 2020”. Of course, questions arise about the way these numbers were compiled. Hence, the author has decided to research this issue over the space of 1 to 1.5 years.

In 2019 and in early 2020, US B-52 strategic bombers took off from the Anderson Air Force Base in Guam and flew over the East Sea, not far from the DPRK. However, during Donald Trump’s presidential term, the US Air Force aircraft were withdrawn from Guam, officially to make the American strategy less predictable. This only concerned, however, the B-52 strategic bombers. According to a March 2018 statement by General Vincent Brooks, former commander of United States Forces Korea, the US and ROK troops jointly conducted numerous multilateral shows of force utilizing B-1 Lancer bombers. In August 2020, Lieutenant General in the US Air Force Richard Clark said that US bombers would “continue to provide security assurances, as well as deterrence against North Korea’s conventional and nuclear capabilities” to USA’s allies.

On occasion, E-8C surveillance and E-8C JSTARS (Joint Surveillance Target Attack Radar System) aircraft as well as Global Hawk unmanned reconnaissance drones have been deployed over the Korean Peninsula.
Military drills near North Korea’s borders have also been staged. The Chosun Ilbo newspaper published an interesting report claiming that Moon Jae-in’s “office had called in senior military officers and berated them over” the leak about an unannounced joint exercise conducted by the Navy and the Air Force on May 6, 2020.

From July 16 to 17, 2020, South Korea, Japan and Spain “took part in a multilateral anti-piracy drill in waters off Somalia”.

From August 17 to 31, 2020, RIMPAC (the Rim of the Pacific Exercise), the world’s largest international maritime warfare drill, was held in Hawaiian territories. The ROK sent two destroyers, two Lynx naval choppers and 570 service members to take part in it. In 2020, this exercise was reduced in scale due to concerns over COVID-19 in comparison to 2018, when South Korea’s submarine, patrol plane and approximately 700 of its troops, along with 2 destroyers, participated in it.

There are also annual ROK-US joint military drills that in 2020, took place from August 18 to 28. And just as in spring 2021, when they lasted only for 9 days, the 2020 drills were scaled back to an already low-key training program mainly involving computer-simulated war scenarios. South Korean media outlets reported that since the two allies “were not able to carry out a planned Full Operational Capability (FOC) test” in 2020, this has further diminished prospects for Seoul’s taking over “wartime operational control (OPCON) of its troops from Washington” in the near future.

There appears to be a certain pattern to ROK’s actions that Kim Yo-jong later criticized. First of all, military exercises aimed at rehearsing for an armed confrontation between the ROK and North Korea are still being carried out. Secondly, according to South Korean reports, recent war drills were scaled back because American troops “were not able to come” to the ROK under coronavirus-related restrictions and not out of respect for existing inter-Korean agreements.

From October 19 to 30, 2020, Hoguk, an annual military exercise, took place across South Korea. It involved the Army, Navy, Air Force and Marine Corps and included joint landing drills and those to defend northwestern islands in the Yellow Sea. According to South Korea’s JCS (Joint Chiefs of Staff) spokesperson, the Hoguk exercise was a defensive drill centered on maintaining military readiness and improving joint operations capabilities.

From December 7 to 11, 2020, the ROK and the United States conducted a scaled-back version of their original wintertime drills, codenamed Vigilant Ace, involving South Korea’s F-15K and KF-16 fighter jets and USA’s F-16s.

On January 1, 2021, “in a show of commitment to national defense”, President Moon Jae-in flew on an E-737 Peace Eye military aircraft and inspected South Korea’s combat readiness. It was the first time that an ROK leader took a flight on an airborne early warning and control (AEW&C) plane, and such an act could be regarded as, at a minimum, an important gesture in support of the military.

On January 25, 2021, South Korea’s Unification Minister Lee In-young expressed hope that “a wise and flexible solution on whether to hold joint military drills with the United States” could be found so that the issue would “not cause serious tensions on the Korean Peninsula”. However, on January 27, 2021, Minister of National Defense Suh Wook announced that the ROK would “stage annual springtime military exercises with the United States as planned”. He stressed that the joint drills, which would be conducted as a computer-simulated command post exercise (CPX), were regular and purely defensive in nature. The official also said that the ROK side was ready to discuss this “issue with the North via military channels to ease tensions”.

Based on reports in South Korea’s media outlets, it seems that the issue of main concern for the ROK and US was whether or not the Full Operational Capability (FOC) test would be held during the joint exercises. Although no exact timeframe has been set, the current administration hopes to retake OPCON during Moon Jae-in’s term that ends in May 2022 if the FOC is conducted as planned. The test “is meant to check if Seoul is on course to meet the conditions for the transition”.

On February 24, 2021, Suh Hoon, Director of the National Security Office in aid of the President, said the allies’ regular military drill, scheduled to be held in March, would be “reduced in size and scope due to the COVID-19
pandemic” and there would be no actual maneuvering of troops and equipment. The same day, Ministry of National Defense spokesperson Boo Seung-chan announced that South Korea and the United States had “yet to finalize the schedule and other details of a planned combined springtime military exercise”, with “the joint computer-simulated command post training” expected to begin in around the second week of March.

On March 5, 2021, Pentagon Press Secretary John Kirby stated that the United States took “its commitment to the security of South Korea very seriously”. The remarks came after a number of reports claimed that South Korea was possibly “considering calling off the countries’ joint military drill”. However, from March 2 to 5, 2021, the JSC announced the combined exercise would be held as planned, and it was staged from March 8 to 18. The drills took place without any incidents, but an editorial published by The Korea Herald pointed out that some retired military officers and experts were “concerned about the prolonged absence of field maneuver training” and that combined training had not been conducted normally since 2018 because the South Korean government was “trying to curry favor with” the DPRK.

It was also announced beforehand that the verification of the Full Operational Capability would be limited during the exercise. Still, the Combined Command Post Training (CCPT) was conducted as planned. During talks in South Korea, US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin stated that the drills were a success.

On March 8, 2021, South Korea’s Ministry of Unification once again called on the North to show a wise and flexible attitude toward a joint military drill with the US, saying Washington and Seoul had scaled the exercise down to a “minimum” level. In answer to a journalist’s question about when and how the two sides would stage joint real maneuvers, Boo Seung-chan, as reported on March 9, said South Korea and the United States were supposed to conduct “combined outdoor military drills throughout the year, not during specific periods of time”.

Criticisms issued by Kim Yo-jong most likely fell on deaf ears. On March 16, Boo Seung-chan reiterated that South Korea-US combined exercises were conducted on a regular basis and were defensive in nature. “Our stance is that North Korea should take a flexible stance, such as responding to our dialogue offer, for the establishment of permanent and solid peace on the Korean Peninsula,” he also stated.

In the meantime, the ROK continues to take part in various military exercises. In March 2020, the US-led United Nations Command (UNC) held a training drill with South Korean law enforcement authorities aimed at coping with Chinese fishing boats operating ‘in record numbers’ near the neutral waters of a Han River estuary.

On May 18, 2021 it was reported that the ROK would take part in an annual US-led multinational air force drill, called Red Flag-Alaska 21-2, for the first time in three years in June. The exercise, set to take place in Alaska from June 10-25, will involve around 1,500 service members and 100 aircraft. South Korea’s Air Force “plans to send F-15K fighter jets, cargo planes and dozens of troops” there. The Japan Air Self-Defense Force is also expected to participate in it.

In conclusion, the author would like to say that even though Kim Yo-jong exaggerated the number of military drills South Korea has been involved in, it is quite clear that they are held on a regular basis. In addition, these exercises have been staged in scaled down format not out of respect for inter-Korean agreements but because of Coronavirus restrictions. And this means that if it were not for the pandemic, these drills would most likely have been staged as they normally would have been before the Olympic Thaw.

It is also important to point out the difference in approaches taken by the DPRK and ROK. South Korean officials seem to believe that removing offensive-oriented parts of drills and continuing to conduct them as computer-simulated exercises would appease North Korea. But the latter’s leaders are opposed to the staging of any military drills. According to Kim Yo-jong, her compatriots were against joint exercises targeting the DPRK, irrespective of their scale or form and whether they were conducted in secret or only involved 50 or 100 persons due to the widespread pandemic.

So what is the future of such joint drills? This remains to be seen as the new US administration seems intent on rebuilding its alliances, and thus involving its partners in plans to keep China and the DPRK in check.

Hence, it is quite likely that military exercises will continue to be staged but their scale will depend on the level of tensions in the region. After all, the North Korean leadership has so far limited their response to drills, conducted in a computer-simulated format, to harsh statements that could be tolerated.

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