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## Joint Military Exercises Between US And South Korea Not Likely To Affect North Korea Denuclearizing Efforts

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North Korea Monday morning fired off two ballistic missiles in what is largely being perceived as a provocative act of defiance that came just hours before South Korea's planned annual joint military exercises with the United States were set to begin. The move follows North Korea's proposal early last week for a moratorium on its nuclear weapons testing in exchange for cancelation of the drills, before Friday's subsequent threat to "wage a merciless war against the U.S." after it was announced the exercises would go on as scheduled.

Monday's missile testing – which is similar in nature to past arms testing it has conducted in recent years and prompted a harsh rebuke from South Korea and Japan – only underscored the notion to critics that the Foal Eagle and Key Resolve training would not have any impact on the ongoing efforts to get North Korea to denuclearize, some foreign relations experts said. South Korean military officials announced the military drills last week.

Pyongyang should not have been surprised about the military exercises, which happen each year around the same time and have been held for about 40 years, or the U.S. rejection of North Korea's proposed compromise for the operations' cancelation, said Stephen Bosworth, senior fellow at the Harvard Kennedy School of Government. North Korean leader Kim Jong Un's subsequent response of vowing – and then showing -- increased aggression was also expected, said Bosworth, who noted that the antagonism during the period of the bilateral exercises will likely blow over. "It's not going to have an effect on ongoing efforts to get North Korea to denuclearize," Bosworth said.

Washington saw Pyongyang's would-be olive branch gesture as an admission of its planned nuclear weapons testing, in a climate when global efforts have been heightened in trying to reduce North Korea's nuclear capabilities. "The DPRK statement that inappropriately links routine US-ROK exercises to the possibility of a nuclear test by North Korea is an implicit threat," said State Department spokeswoman Jen Psaki, using the short form for the Democratic People's Republic of Korea and Republic of Korea, which refers to North and South Korea, according to Reuters.

North Korea had routinely claimed each year the exercises were a pretext for invasion. "A chance for dialogue and diplomatic solution had already been scuppered," North Korea's news agency KCNA said last Tuesday in response to having its self-imposed moratorium rejected. "What remains to be done is to militarily react to the U.S. while bolstering up war deterrence to the maximum," KCNA continued. "The whole course of Key Resolve and Foal Eagle is aimed to

occupy the DPRK through preemptive strikes,” according to KCNA. "The DPRK will wage a merciless sacred war against the U.S. now that the latter has chosen confrontation," the country's official KCNA news agency said Friday, according to Reuters. "Nuclear weapons are not a monopoly of the U.S. The U.S. is seriously mistaken if it thinks its mainland is safe."

There is precedence for American skepticism about a purported nuclear moratorium from North Korea, which in 2012 reached a deal with the U.S. for a similar suspension of nuclear arms activity, only to scrap it months later. “The only way the exercises may be canceled would be if North Korea made major reconciliatory actions,” said Ted Galen Carpenter, senior fellow at the Cato Institute, a Washington D.C think tank. Carpenter said that it would take big measures, such as North Korea withdrawing troops from the demilitarized zone dividing the two Koreas or making a serious commitment to denuclearizing. “Even then, the U.S. government might only consider postponing [the exercises] and not completely stopping them,” he said. Carpenter added that once the exercises end, inter-Korea relations will go back to being “chilly” instead of “extremely chilly.”

Foal Eagle, a computer-simulated command exercise that will end March 13, and Key Resolve, which involves ground, air and naval deployments scheduled to last until April 24, are considered to be one of the largest joint military exercises conducted annually in the world, with around 200,000 Korean and 3,700 U.S. troops. But they are also a matter of bilateral relations between South Korea and the U.S., and played no part in the recent efforts to denuclearize North Korea during January’s talks in Singapore between American and North Korean officials, according to Joseph DeTrani, president of the Intelligence and National Security Agency.

“The North Korean officials seemed to show an understanding that the exercises are part of a longstanding relationship between the ROK and the United States, and that they are completely defensive in nature,” said DeTrani, whose organization examines policy issues and solutions. North Korea had understood the nature of Foal Eagle and Key Resolve, he said, even back in 2005 when former ruler Kim Jong Il signed a joint statement promising economic assistance in exchange for steps for North Korea to denuclearize. DeTrani said that there was really no reason for Pyongyang to claim the exercises were anything but defensive, but they did anyway.

Denuclearizing has become the most important agenda for global efforts on North Korea, in addition to getting the hermit kingdom to normalize relations with the outside world. North Korea has declared itself a nuclear state, revising its constitution to reflect its commitment to nuclear development in 2012. The country has also shown signs of restarting a nuclear reactor in January capable of producing weapons-grade plutonium. The U.S. has spent more than 20 years trying to get North Korea to abandon its nuclear program but failed. The Six-Party Talks involving the U.S., China, Japan, Russia and South Korea aimed at getting the North to denuclearize almost seemed like it could have been restarted this year after having been abandoned since 2009, and progress in disarming North Korea's nuclear capabilities have been at a standstill, according to Bosworth.

Despite North Korea’s aggression, DeTrani said, its leadership is genuinely interested in normalizing relations. “I do really think that Kim Jong Un would like to see more relationships with the outside world,” said DeTrani, adding that Kim Jong Il, from whom Kim Jong Un inherited power in 2012 when his father died, had similar visions as well. He said that what the world needed to hear from DPRK leadership was North Korea's commitment to having more ties

with the ROK instead of vowing vengeance every time something like Foal Eagle comes along. “The DPRK should worry more about the nuclear issue that has been sitting on the table for 25 years rather than a defensive military exercise that has been around for 40 years,” said DeTrani.