



Can The Korean Security Spiral Be De-Escalated?

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In international relations, a security spiral is a nasty thing. And the most dangerous security spiral in the world right now is on the Korean peninsula — a spiral that got much worse over the last week.

A security spiral exists when a country tries to change the objectionable behavior of another by applying pressure — but instead of acquiescing, the target digs in its heels. The original country, instead of backing down or changing course, doubles down on pressure, which in turn causes target to become more belligerent. And this restarts the cycle.

De-escalating the security spiral on the Korean peninsula will be very challenging. The United States, as the most powerful country involved, should take the lead on de-escalation because its power advantages give it more freedom of action.

The Korean security spiral has been gaining steam for a while. The failure of negotiations at the 2019 United States-North Korea summit in Hanoi ended an effort to diplomatically address North Korea's nuclear arsenal. The COVID-19 pandemic helped keep things relatively quiet as North Korea locked itself down, but this pause was short lived.

In January 2021, Kim Jong Un's report at the 8th Party Congress outlined a plan for expanding the country's nuclear arsenal by developing tactical nuclear weapons that could be used against U.S. and South Korean military units. A handful of missile tests occurred in 2021, but things really heated up the following year.

North Korea kicked off 2022 with four ballistic missile tests in three weeks that included tests of a new type of maneuvering warhead. In March, Kim tested a new intercontinental-range ballistic

missile (ICBM) that could likely carry multiple warheads, but evidence suggests it probably failed during the test.

The security spiral accelerated after South Korea's new president, Yoon Suk-yeol, assumed office in May. Yoon was eager to resume large-scale U.S.-South Korea military exercises that were originally suspended in 2018 as part of diplomatic engagement with North Korea.

The first major joint exercises took place in August without much of a reaction from North Korea, but subsequent exercises in September through November saw robust reactions. Between Sept. 25 and Oct. 9, North Korea conducted a series of military exercises that overlapped with U.S.-South Korea naval drills. North Korea explicitly linked their activities to the U.S.-South Korea military exercises, stating "acts of escalating the tension will only invite our greater reaction."

The next major U.S.-South Korea exercise—an air force exercise called Vigilant Storm—took place last week. North Korea's response to Vigilant Storm was extensive and featured artillery and air force drills, an ICBM test, and launches of multiple types of shorter-range cruise and ballistic missiles. The U.S. and South Korea responded by extending Vigilant Storm and flying two U.S. bombers from Guam to the peninsula in a show of force.

North Korean officials again explicitly linked their activities to the U.S.-South Korea joint exercises and promised more pressure for pressure if exercises continue. American and South Korean officials stated they would continue to strengthen deterrence by deploying "strategic assets" to the peninsula to "reinforce deterrence in the face of [North Korea's] destabilizing activities."

De-escalating the security spiral on the Korean peninsula is going to be difficult. South Korea and the United States frame the issue as a problem of insufficient deterrence, but deterring further missile tests is probably impossible. Washington and Seoul are most likely not going to start a war over a test, and there are few options for further isolating North Korea's already heavily sanctioned economy.

Improving North Korean missile capabilities will likely prompt calls from Seoul for bigger displays of U.S. commitment to South Korea's defense, which could take the form of more joint military exercises and deployments of strategic U.S. capabilities. However, such actions are likely to further accelerate the existing spiral rather than break it, given North Korea's demonstrated willingness to respond to pressure with more pressure of its own.

North Korea's ambitions for improving its nuclear forces, which it signaled before the return of U.S.-South Korea military exercises, will also make the spiral worse. Even if the U.S. and South Korea halted exercises, Kim Jong Un is unlikely to halt his own activities given the domestic significance he placed on improving North Korea's nuclear arsenal. If North Korea moves ahead with a test of a nuclear weapon, which would be its first since September 2017, there is a good chance of the spiral devolving into a crisis or conflict.

The United States is in the best position to take the lead on de-escalating the spiral, but it would likely require the United States to take costly actions. Examples of costly actions include moving away from the goal of denuclearizing North Korea, adjusting force posture in exchange for a moratorium on North Korean testing activities, or putting some sanctions relief on the table.

Without steps toward de-escalation the current security spiral on the Korean peninsula will keep getting worse and the risks of a conflict will grow. If a conflict does occur, it will likely feature nuclear use given North Korea's reliance on early, rapid nuclear escalation to prevail in a conflict and South Korea's plans to attack the North's political leadership as quickly as possible to prevent a nuclear strike. De-escalation is difficult, but the alternative is much worse.

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