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Rethinking South Korean Defense: The Impact of the Maritime Dimension



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South Korea to Add an F-35 Enabled Sea Base: What Does it Mean?

10/07/2020

This summer, the South Koreans revealed that they were going to build a larger amphibious ship, and configure it to operate F-35Bs onboard.

In 2018, the South Korean Navy launched its second 14,500 Dodo-class amphibious ship.

At the time of the launch ceremony in May 2018, the South Korean defense minister noted: “In order to preserve our maritime sovereignty at sea and play a role as a member of the international community, we have to move farther toward greater oceans,” the minister said. “I’m convinced that the Marado will bring honor to the Republic of Korea by contributing northeast Asian and global maritime security.”

According to one source: “The Dokdo-class LPH can carry up to 720 fully equipped marines, 10 tanks, 10 trucks, seven amphibious assault vehicles and three artillery systems. It can sail at a maximum speed of 41 kilometers with a crew of 300 aboard.

“The well deck has a capacity for two landing craft. Below the deck hanger, 15 helicopters, including two V-22s, can fit while the flight deck can simultaneously accommodate up to five helicopters of all types, according to DAPA.” officials.

With this experience under their belt, they are moving on to build a larger ship, once which can operate fast jets. Rather than trying to cram F-35Bs onto a traditional amphibious ship, the South Koreans have decided to build more towards the USS America approach. They will build an aviation oriented ship without a well deck for launching amphibious vehicles.

But why are they building it?

How will it be used?

How does this platform decision presage changes in South Korean strategy?

And how will adding this capability for the South Korean force alter how they would need to think about ship defense and offenses involving a larger deck amphibious ship?

I will deal with these questions in later articles in this series but would first like to review answers to these questions which have been suggested in articles published after the decision became evident.

Let me review those answers.

According to Robert Farley writing in The Diplomat:

South Korea's primarily military problem remains the existence and hostility of North Korea. But with both Japan and China building aircraft carriers, and with the United States no longer a reliable partner, the decision to pursue carriers has a clear strategic logic.

The prominence and novelty of the Japanese and Chinese carrier programs almost certainly mean that considerations of national prestige also play a role.

Still, one or two carriers would have their uses in a military confrontation with Pyongyang, offering South Korea a means of conducting mobile strikes from unpredictable vectors.

For Farley, the South Koreans are doing this because the United States is no longer a reliable partner. The Japanese and Chinese are building carriers, hence South Korea needs to do so. And finally, the amphibious ships with F-35Bs onboard allow mobile strikes from unpredictable vectors.

According to David Axe writing in Forbes, the new capability would provide more options in dealing with the core threat from North Korea

“The Inchon amphibious gambit worked in 1950. It could work again in the 2020s or later. For that reason the United States and South Korea maintain strong amphibious forces on and around the Korean Peninsula...

“Land-based fighters could contribute to the amphibious campaign, of course—as could U.S. Navy fighters from the U.S. Pacific Fleet’s supercarriers. But the amphibious group’s organic fighters, operating close to the beaches directly in support of the landing force, likely would provide the most effective air support.”

According to Joseph Trevitchik, the F-35B is a key addition in terms of providing force mobility to the South Korean forces/

“No matter what the ship’s final configuration might be, it stands to offer the South Korean Navy, and the country’s military as a whole, an important new capability in face of a variety of regional threats. Being able to launch F-35Bs from a ship at sea would be invaluable during any conflict with North Korea, when established bases on land would be subjected to heavy attacks. The B model Joint Strike Fighters could also use their vertical takeoff and landing capabilities to operate from fortified roads or simple concrete pads on shore, as well.”

For Kyle Mizokami, the new ship with its F-35Bs onboard are part of an effort to enhance war fighting capabilities against North Korea and are part of South Korean deference strategy.

“All of this makes South Korea a maritime country by nature. The threat from North Korea, however, has until recently forced it to invest much of its defense budget in its ground forces.

“An aircraft carrier will give South Korea the ability to fly combat missions against North Korea from directions other than over the demilitarized zone. Parked in the Sea of Japan or Yellow Sea, LPX-II will be able to fly F-35Bs into North Korea from the west or east, forcing the totalitarian state to remain vigilant to threats from not only the south, but also the west and east.

“Carrier-based aircraft would also be able to take advantage of blind spots in North Korean air defense system, egressing the country where its aging military infrastructure has created gaps in radar coverage.”

Mizokami also cited the regional prestige argument as well.

“Another likely factor is South Korea’s historical feud with Japan, which once held the Korean peninsula as a colony. In 2018, Japan signaled its intent to transform its two Izumo-class helicopter destroyers into ships capable of carrying fixed-wing aircraft, and announced plans to purchase 42 F-35Bs. Japan’s building of aircraft carriers, which it largely did as a response to China’s building of aircraft carriers, created pressure for South Korea to follow suit.”

To summarize: The South Koreans are building their large deck amphibious ships for prestige reasons; They have built it to provide for new options to deal with the North Korean threat; they are building it because the United States is no longer a reliable partner.

Although the announcement of building a larger amphibious ship was news, the acquisition of F-35B is not so surprising. There is a growing set of nations in the Pacific who have grasped the point that the F-35B provides deployment options crucial in facing an enemy with enhanced strike capability against fixed targets.

But that point deserves further treatment as well.

And the question of how to shape a task force which would operate with such a ship is a significant one as well.

A South Korean F-35B Enabled Light Carrier: What Might be Its Impact?

10/15/2020

The South Korean Air Force has added F-35As to their combat force. They are now on track to add F-35Bs to a sea base.

An aspect of F-35s which is critical to understand is how they communicate and how they hunt as a pack.

With the South Korean wolfpack of F-35s, 8 ship formations (with Block IV software) can hunt as a pack.

This gives the South Koreans the capability to use F-35s from the sea as a separate strike force are operate as part of a land-based strike force.

What it does give is a much wider range of launch points against an adversary.

And with the core allies of South Korea adding significant numbers of F-35s to Pacific operations, the South Koreans can leverage an extensive web of F-35s working as a C2/ISR kill web.

There are security limitations, but with the way security is handled inside the aircraft, it is possible to alter which data is shareable dependent upon policy decisions.

But the core point is that the F-35 has significant reach into a 21st century “big blue blanket.”

As the CO of MAWTS-1, Col. Gillette described it:

“The development is a significant one. It is not only a question of interoperability among the F-35 fleet, it is the ability to have common logistical and support in the region with your allies, flying the same aircraft with the same parts.

“And the big opportunity comes with regard to the information point I made earlier. We are in the early stages of exploiting what the F-35 force can provide in terms of information dominance in the Pacific, but the foundation has been laid.

“When we highlight the F-35 as the 21st century version of what the World War II Navy called the big blue blanket with the redundancy and the amount of information that could be utilized, it’s pretty astonishing if you think about it.

“The challenge is to work the best ways to sort through the information resident in the F-35 force and then how do you utilize it in an effective and efficient way for the joint force. But the foundation is clearly there.”

Given that a major trajectory of change in the Pacific is the USMC and the US Navy working on enhanced integratability, and given the central role F-35 is and will play in that process, South Korea is joining a dynamic process of change with regard to the evolution of interconnected sea bases.

This means as well that the South Korean sea base can be used either to support operations against North Korea, by providing alternative vectors of operations, or in terms of reaching out into the region to protect their interests and to work with allies in the region.

Clearly, China has and will extend their reach in the region and will do so in part by their maritime power. South Korea has maritime capabilities for sure, but not well tied to regional power presence.

But building out such capabilities with an F-35 enabled sea base is a very effective way to do so.

With the USMC and the United Kingdom following similar trajectories with regard to how to operate F-35B enabled sea bases, there are allies whom the South Koreans could work with directly in shaping their con-ops as well.

Despite historic rivalries and challenges with Japan and Singapore operating F-35Bs, it can be expected that cross learning and cross operations are on the table.

That then raises the question of the task force in which the F-35B enabled sea base would operate.

What organic capabilities do the South Koreans need to consider onboard to operate most effectively and to be effective building blocks for either the national or allied deterrent structures?

South Korea Builds an F-35-Enabled Amphibious Ship: How to Shape a Task Force?

10/18/2020

The South Koreans have announced that they will build an F-35B enabled light carrier.

The LPX-11 is expected to displace around 40,000 tons fully loaded. An original design concept had a ski jump like the Queen Elizabeth carrier, but the latest rendition does not have this feature. The ship is projected to become the flagship of a task force.

The question of how it would work as the lead of a task force poses significant questions with regard to how South Korea will configure the ship and work integrability with its fleet and those of its allies. In 2019, the South Koreans released their Navy Vision 2045 plan. In addition to the light carrier, the plan envisaged a 5,000-ton weapons barge which is visualized in the featured graphic above.

The South Korean Navy is building out its submarine capabilities as well its KDX-III destroyers.

Currently, there are only two operational models with regard to how to do so.

The first is being developed by the Queen Elizabeth carrier, but it is a much larger ship and is being built around its ability to work with both the surface and subsurface fleet being developed by the Royal Navy.

In my visit to Portsmouth in 2018, I discussed how the Royal Navy was thinking through the nature of a Queen Elizabeth led task force. A clear element of this effort is to shape a carrier led maritime task force for blue water operations, and secondarily, as an amphibious led task force operational template.

This is currently being seen in the Atlantic as the HMS Queen Elizabeth is leading a carrier strike group. A clear challenge in the decade ahead will be adding the supporting capabilities needed to make full use of carrier strike.

A key element of the UK approach relevant to South Korea, clearly is the expectation that the F-35s onboard the UK carrier will be able to work with land-based Typhoons and other air delivered assets to get the full impact from carrier led operations.

But the size of this carrier, and the weapons load outs which it can carry as well as the number of F-35s is much higher than the South Korean light carrier.

More relevant is the case of the USS America class both in terms of numbers of F-35s and the amphibious and carrier strike mix to be carried onboard and the approach to shaping an amphibious strike group.

It is to the USMC that the more relevant case will be for South Korea. If that is the case, then the dynamics of change going on with regard to USMC and US Naval integration is significant as well as the changes underway which can enable the evolution of how the amphibious task force can deliver more capability in the maritime domain.

During my visit to MAWTS-1 this past month, the CO of MAWTS-1, Col. Gillette laid on how he saw the transition.

He addressed two key questions during the visit: “How is the Marine Corps going to contribute most effectively to the Pacific mission in terms of Sea Control and Sea Denial? And how to best contribute to the defensive and offensive operations affecting the SLOCs?”

This is the question I asked him and his response.

Question: Ever since the revival of the Bold Alligator exercises, I have focused on how the amphibious fleet can shift from its greyhound bus role to shaping a task force capable of operating in terms of sea denial and sea control. With the new America-class ships in the fleet, this clearly is the case.

How do you view the revamping of the amphibious fleet in terms of providing new for the USMC and the US Navy to deliver sea control and sea denial?

Col. Gillette: “The traditional approach for the amphibious force is move force to an area of interest. Now we need to look at the entire maritime combat space, and ask how we can contribute to that combat space, and not simply move force from A to B.

“I think the first leap is to think of the amphibious task force, as you call it, to become a key as pieces on the chess board. As with any piece, they have strengths and weaknesses. Some of the weaknesses are clear, such as the need for a common operational picture, a command and control suite to where the assets that provide data feeds to a carrier strike group are also incorporated onto L-Class shipping. We’re working on those things right now, in order to bring the situational awareness of those types of ships up to speed with the rest of the Naval fleet.”

The F-35s onboard the South Korean light carrier could leverage weapons onboard the destroyers or the projected arsenal ship, but a key question is how best to shape a task force that can defend that ship as the lead element of sea denial or sea control force. The ability to tap into other weapons carriers, and to do third party targeting, which the F-35 is very good at doing is clearly part of it.

Also part of it is to focus on the kind of rotorcraft integrability which the task force carries as well. And here there is a new innovative opportunity for the South Koreans to consider. The Romeos provide a significant ASW and Anti-surface warfare capability, but with the Vipers becoming Link-16 and full-motion video capable next year, the ability to operate Romeo and Viper packages in ship defense is a key capability for the amphibious task force.

In any case, having a maritized helicopter on board which can provide for significant strike capabilities against maritime, land and air capabilities would be a solid addition to the amphibious task force.

As argued in an earlier article:

As the US Navy reworks how it is operating as a distributed maritime force, which is being reshaped around the capability to operate a kill web force, the question of how best to leverage and evolve the amphibious force is a key part of that transition itself.

This is a work in progress, and one in which a determination of various paths to the future are in evolution and will be subject to debate as well.

Part of that evolution are changes in other elements of the amphibious task force which can over time play roles different from how various “legacy” platforms can be reworked to provide for new or expanded capabilities for the US Navy overall.

A case in point is how the Viper attack aircraft can evolve its roles AT SEA with the addition of key elements being generated by the digital interoperability effort, as well as adding a new weapons capability to the Viper, namely, the replacement for the Hellfire missile by the JAGM.

What this means is that the Viper can be a key part of the defense of the fleet while embarked on a variety of ships operating either independently, or as part of an amphibious task force.

Because the Viper can land on and operate from of a wide range of ships, thus enabling operational and logistical flexibility, and with integration of Link 16 and full motion wave forms as part of digital interoperability improvements, the Viper can become a key member of the kill web force at sea.

Additionally, with digital interoperability enablement, the Viper can be reimagined in terms of how it might work with other members of the at sea task force.

A key example would be how it might work with the Seahawks operating from the L Class ships as well.

As argued in [an earlier article](#):

My interviews with [NAWDC](#) have underscored how the Navy is working through the question of how the integratable air wing will change when the MQ-25 joins the fleet, and working ways for the Romeo to work with MQ-25 and Advanced Hawkeye will inform Romeo as part of its fleet defense function.

“The Romeo community is already looking at how having sensors onboard the MQ-25 can expand the reach and range of what the Romeo’s onboard sensors can accomplish for the maritime distributed force.

“It is also the case that as sensor demands currently made on the Romeo can be shifted elsewhere.

“The Romeo can refocus its task priorities and enhance its contributions to broader mission sets such as ASW and to focus on contributing capabilities that other platforms within the strike group are not prioritized to perform.”

Clearly, integrating Romeos which fly onboard the amphibious class ships with the Viper would provide a significant enhancement of the flank defense capabilities for the amphibious task force.

And working a Romeo/Viper package would affect as well the evolution of the Romeos that would fly off of the L class ships as well.

And all of this, frees up other surface elements to support other missions at sea, rather than having to focus on defending the amphibs as greyhound buses.

As the South Koreans build out their maritime strike force, they might think through how to best build out an amphibious task force which best deliver its ability to operate as an offensive-defensive strike capability in the region.

And if the South Koreans choose the Leonardo ASW helicopter, the question of working with the Viper still makes sense.

In an amphibious task force, the point is not to simply to carry the attack helicopter to its launch point for land attack; it is to be available as a strike asset at sea or ashore.

And to do so being able to operate across the fleet as needed as well.

This the Viper can do very well for sure.

Shaping Capabilities for the Crisis Management Piece for South Korean Defense

04/19/2021

With the kind of authoritarian powers against which we are competing, the old strategies need to be re-examined.

And assumptions made about armed conventional conflict against nuclear powers carefully looked at as well.

No area of the world is this more true than in the Korean peninsula, where the options for the United States in dealing with a nuclear North Korea has for all intents and purposes taken any thought of a long conventional operational deterrence simply off of the table.

In this three part series, I will examine how that situation has changed and how the United States can best contribute to deterrence going forward in the Korean Peninsula.

The crisis management aspect of South Korean defense has grown in importance as North Korea continues down its nuclear force path, and South Korean conventional defense has become largely a national solution set.

The two developments have significant consequences for the United States.

With the natural progression of conventional defense in the hands of the Republic of Korea, the U.S. ground forces are no longer the core force for fighting a large-scale conventional war.

And for the North Korean regime, nuclear weapons play a key role for guaranteeing regime survival in the face of a significant move towards large scale conflict.

And the threat to use is a key element of a policy designed to shape outcomes favorable to North Korea in case of significant conflict.

A significant conventional conflict in the Peninsula will boil down quite rapidly for the United States into how best to execute a nuclear use strategy which would convince the North Koreans to return to the status quo prior to the ramping up of conventional conflict.

As Paul Bracken has put it in a recent discussion: “The core threat to the United States in the Korean Peninsula, both for deterrence and operations, has changed.

“From a ground counter attack led by US and ROK across the DMZ, we have now shifted to a need to prepare for a massive precision strike by US on NK’s nuclear weapons and staging areas in case of a significant conventional strike by North Korea against U.S. and South Korean forces.”

Put another way, it is very unlikely that a pure play large scale conventional conflict in the Korean Peninsula is realistic.

The nuclear use option would be in play rapidly in face of a major conventional force confrontation.

Or put even more bluntly, I really do not think there is an alternative to nuclear use if there is a major conventional war on the Peninsula.

That is why finding ways to enhance crisis management capabilities for South Korea supportable in practical ways by U.S. and allied military and diplomatic capabilities is crucial to shaping a way ahead.

With the North Koreans having demonstrated in the recent past their willingness to pressure South Korea in various ways on the Peninsula, and with an enhanced North Korean Special Forces insertion capability which can be used in pressure points on the perimeter of South Korea, South Korean capabilities to match such actions and to deliver crisis management checkmates is crucial.

In a 2013 meeting with my former professor, Zbig Brzezinski we discussed the North Korean challenge. I would like to go back to that discussion and highlight some of the elements in that discussion.

I had the privilege to study and work with Dr. Zbigniew Brzezinski in my time as a student and for my first research job. With Brzezinski, one is always pushed towards the “Zbig” picture. And for me, such engagement is always an important stimulus to re-thinking one’s assumptions and re-shaping one’s intellectual tapestry.

It was no different this week, when I visited him in his office and we settled down to discuss the current Korean crisis and the way ahead to deal with the crisis. One concern which I have had in watching both the discussions about and the policy reactions to the crisis is the implicit assumption that what is occurring now is simply a replay of what has happened earlier. To put it simply, the historical patterns seem to be the following: North Korea saber rattles, and uses the crisis to generate a new flow of revenue from those states most threatened by the saber rattling. The North Korean crisis is establishing

rules for the Second Nuclear Age. Washington clearly needs to focus on what we need to do to restore deterrence and to lay a foundation for the future.

This crisis is different. First, the North Koreans have a new leader, not necessarily engaged in following his predecessor's pattern of behavior.

Second, North Korea has been evolving both warhead and delivery technologies, so a new crisis with new capabilities might lead to expectations of different outcomes than before. Might nuclear threats reshape the military forces facing you in a positive way, from the perspective of the North Korean leader?

Third, Japan is different. Japan may call their forces a self-defense force but they are becoming transformed into a "dynamic defense" force not simply willing to set back and take strikes. Fourth, South Korea and Japan might well go nuclear in response to the evolution of North Korean capabilities and lack of restraint. With the Administration public ally committed to reductions in nuclear weapons and precious little focus on expanding deterrent warfighting capabilities, do Japan and South Korea want to depend on the "Battle of Benghazi" President?

It is clear that the current crisis is part of the learning process of the Second Nuclear Age as envisaged by Paul Bracken. What those lessons are what rules of the road are being developed and we will know only when the current crisis has matured and receded in whatever manner it does so.

But for now, we can focus on what we need to do to restore deterrence and to lay a foundation for the future. Brzezinski emphasized the need for airpower to hold at risk the artillery capabilities of North Korea threatening South Korea, as well as being able to destroy delivery capabilities and being able to hold at risk the leadership. And he emphasized the importance of discussing with the Chinese at the highest level what we were prepared to do, and that we would not accept an outcome dictated by North Korean threats. We might even request their help in identifying targets with regard to holding leadership at risk.

Presumably, the Chinese might well take this discussion forward in providing advice to North Korea and providing a solid dose of reality. It is important for the North Korean leadership to understand that the United States was not going to sit idly by and be blackmailed by North Korea and, more important than words, is mobilizing the capacity to underscore the reality of this position.

What is needed is a ramp up of air and strike power integration and to build out from that integration effort over time the kind of attack and defense enterprise one will need for Pacific security and defense in the 21st century.

By deploying high-end airpower, F-22s and B-2s to start with, and better integration of the carrier strike force with high-end airpower; it will be possible to enhance the credibility of the deterrent power of an American strike force. And crucial to this as well, will be the ability to integrate various subsurface and surface strike capabilities as well as target identification via various air-breathing and space-based means as part of an integrated strike and defense force.

This is not a slow-motion war in which ground forces are the key. This is a fast-paced crisis in which the invasion of North Korea is not the core deterrent force; an ability to eliminate launch vehicles and to hold the leadership at risk is. The US Army is not a centerpiece of Pacific deterrence.

Have we made much progress since 2013, in force integration with South Korea, stopping a North Korean nuclear build up or the Chinese demonstrating in any way that they would assist in dealing with the nuclear threat of North Korea to the United States and South Korea?

The challenge revolves around how North Korea would leverage their nuclear weapons, and their various conventional forces to pressure South Korea. On the other hand, the continuing interest in political and financial South Korean circles to pursue reunification with North Korea limit the willingness of some in South Korea to deepen force integration with the United States or core allies engaged in South Korean defense.

This leaves in my mind, a major question of how best to ensure crises get managed at the lower end of the escalation ladder so that the nuclear use question does not come into play much earlier in the defense cycle than the old concept of nuclear weapons being at the outer ring of the escalation ladder.

This means, in blunt terms. that shaping more effective crisis management tools and collaboration early in a crisis management cycle is crucial to avoid an inevitable nuclear use challenge.

Enhancing South Korean Crisis Management Capabilities: A Key Deterrent Capability

04/25/2021

As a large-scale conventional war poses early on, the question of nuclear use, for the United States the question becomes how to contain crises before they escalate to this level. This means a much harder look and focus on ways to enhance South Korean crisis management capabilities.

As [Paul Bracken](#), the author of the *Second Nuclear Age* has put it with regard to escalation management:

One of the main reasons the outbreak of World War I was such a surprise to everyone was that the preceding two decades had seen repeated political crises where there was a show of force – but no actual combat between the major powers. They had grown accustomed to this and believed that every crisis would play out this way, with strong messages and force maneuvering, but without combat.

There was no crisis management that existed for actual combat, especially the early clashes of the campaign. No one, for example, had conceived of limited strikes or retaliation, force disengagement, or messaging once the shooting started. The result was that the generals and mobilization plans took over.

The key point for today is that there are many levels of intensity above counterinsurgency and counter terrorism, yet well short of total war. In terms of escalation intensity, this is about one-third up the escalation ladder. Here, there are issues of war termination, disengagement, maneuvering for advantage, signaling, — and yes, further escalation — in a war that is quite limited compared to World War II, but far above the intensity of combat in Iraq and Afghanistan.

He then concluded: “Great power rivalry has returned. A wider range of possibilities has opened up. But binary thinking — that strategy is either low intensity or all-out war — has not. This lesson is too important to learn in the real time pressures of war.”

It needs to be realized that the U.S. Army and its allies have largely lived for the past two decades in the Middle Eastern land wars, where escalation control is not a key feature of their experience. As we face the newly-emerging challenges of full-spectrum crisis management, it is not the lower end of the conflict spectrum dominated by counterinsurgency operations that offers the needed template for dealing with today’s near-peer U.S. competitors.

Rather, it can only be effectively integrated higher-end air and maritime power able to leverage its combined capabilities early on in a future showdown that can provide us with assured escalation dominance.

This challenge has nothing whatever to do with how to manage a slower-motion counterinsurgency effort in a ground campaign. Rather, it is about identifying and fielding the right tools employed in the right way for achieving adequate escalation control as quickly as possible in compressed-time operations. Indeed, the ground-centric thinking of the past decade really has no relevance at all for dealing with nuclear-armed adversaries in any higher-stakes test of strength yet to come.

What then can be done to build out capabilities on the South Korean side to provide for escalation management?

In a recent discussion with a former commander of the Commander of United Nations Command, R.O.K.-U.S. Combined Forces Command, and United States Forces Korea, we discussed what one might call the crisis management capability gap for the South Koreans. His concern was that serious conflict could be generated by the actions of North Korean special forces in a targeted attack or a crisis in the northwest islands between South and North Korea.

How then best to ensure that South Korea could provide for a proportionate response while remaining in firm control of escalation options?

Containment is crucial to ensure that there can be escalation management.

Proportional response is a key part of being able to effectively contain an event and to block it from simply being a step on an out-of-control escalation ladder.

Because the nuclear threshold is so low in the event of significant armed hostilities, being able to do so is even more significant than it would be in an all-conventional escalation situation.

In the next article, I will focus on how the introduction of new at sea capabilities could provide for such options for the South Koreans.

For example, see the 2010 Yeonpyeong Island crisis as an example of the challenge of managing crises and escalation control.

The South Korean Crisis Management Gap: Implications for the United States

05/13/2021

With North Korea working hard to pose an existential threat to the United States via its nuclear weapons development, the United States clearly needs to focus on deterrence and warfighting at the high end level, namely, nuclear use.

It is clear that the North Korean leader focuses on nuclear weapons to preserve his power and that of his regime.

But in relying on nuclear weapons to do so, he has changed the calculus for the United States from reinforcing South Korea in case of a North Korean conventional assault, to one of nuclear deterrence.

And to be blunt about that is about nuclear use.

What are the best options for the use of a nuclear knock out strike in case of North Korea crossing the nuclear threshold?

Frankly, this has little to do with planning for the defense of South Korea.

Defending against a major North Korean conventional assault is the primary responsibility of the South Koreans.

And without a more concerted creation of integration between South Korean and American forces at the C2 level, U.S. options even to reinforce in a short time frame conventional defense of South Korea is limited.

This then means that there is a stark challenge facing South Korea: Enhance your crisis management capabilities and training to deter, deflect and defeat any North Korean conventional incursions designed to destabilize South Korea or its relationship with the United States.

Many of these force insertions by North Korea could be met with counter-insertion forces from sea.

This means that shaping crisis insertion forces in crisis management situations by reconfiguring what South Korean forces could do from a sea base is part of shaping a realistic and effective way ahead.

For example, the South Korean Marine Corps could acquire Viper attack helicopters as part of their arsenal and work with the afloat forces to find ways to insert an attack package into North Korean areas of interest to respond to or counter North Korean destabilization operations.

This is a near term problem requiring a near term solution.

From the American side, it is increasingly important that South Korea build out and demonstrate in exercises and training of the political military class ways to use force against North Korea short of total war.

Alliances rest on the priority for each ally to protect its national interest but by doing so through effective collaboration.

Adding a South Korean force insertion capability from the sea would add an important tool to the tool box, but one which could as well be worked with the USMC as it reworks its own relationship with the U.S. Navy and how best to do blue water expeditionary operations.

Enhancing South Korean Crisis Management Capabilities: The Maritime Contribution

05/24/2021

How then best to ensure that South Korea could provide for a proportionate response while remaining in firm control of escalation options?

By providing means to provide for multiple insertion points against North Korean forces, the South Korean leadership has options to respond to North Korean provocations. Having tools to respond directly to a force insertion threat at a particular point of interest posed by the North Koreans is important; but also having the capability to have tools for a similar level of force insertion at the time and place of South Korean choosing is crucial as well.

It was interesting to note that when the South Koreans announced that they were going to enhance their sea-based force by adding a ship large enough to carry a limited number of F-35Bs, the general reaction was either negative or puzzlement.

But what has been largely missed is the flexibility which such a seabase along with the amphibious force can provide to provide for both response in kind but even more significantly an ability to strike where the North Koreans do not expect a limited strike to come.

With the significant changes which are occurring with an F-35B enabled amphibious task force, the South Koreans can shape a wide variety of options to strike North Korean assets at a time and place of their choosing as part of escalation management. This also enhances the confidence of South Korean leaders that they can operate outside of a narrow zone of direct response, in a tit for tat manner, and to be more creative in shaping crisis management options to be able to master escalation at the lower ends of the ladder.

This requires not only having the military platforms, and forces; but also training the civilian-military leaders to be able to do so. And as such training takes hold, this would change as well the notion of what needs to be acquired to ensure greater force flexibility in the pursuit of more effective options for escalation control.

The F-35s onboard the South Korean light carrier could leverage weapons onboard the destroyers or the projected arsenal ship, but a key question is how best to shape a task force that can defend that ship

as the lead element of sea denial or sea control force. The ability to tap into other weapons carriers, and to do third party targeting, which the F-35 is very good at doing is clearly part of it.

It is important as well to focus on the kind of rotorcraft integrability which the task force carries as well. And here there is a new innovative opportunity for the South Koreans to consider. The Romeos provide a significant ASW and anti-surface warfare capability, but with the Vipers becoming Link-16 and full-motion video capable this year, the ability to operate Romeo and Viper packages in ship defense is a key capability for the amphibious task force.

In any case, having a marinized helicopter on board which can provide for significant strike capabilities against maritime, land and air capabilities would be a solid addition to the amphibious task force. As the ROK Marine Corps considers its options for an attack helicopter, the Viper as a marinized helicopter with a wide variety of strike capabilities which it can carry would provide a significant strike force capability for flexible force insertion to provide for the kind of crisis management flexibility which clearly South Korea needs to master.

In an interview I did last year with Major Thomas Duff and Mr. Michael Manifor, HQMC Aviation, APW-53, Attack and Utility Helicopter Coordinators, we discussed how they saw the evolution of the Viper into the kind of role which is central for the ROK Marine Corps. With regard to the Viper, the helicopter has been built from the ground up as a maritime attack helicopter. The Viper is highly mobile, rapidly deployable, and certified for air capable ships to include LHD, LPD, LSD, LCS, cargo (T-AK/AKE/AKR), and CRUDES (Cruiser-Destroyer).

But because it is fully integrated into MAGTF operations, and operates throughout those operations, it plays a multi-mission role with the deployed Marines. In fact, given the operational envelope within which the helicopter has operated and contributes, this broadens one's understanding of what a multi-mission capable attack helicopter can do for the combat force.

As it was put to me, the Viper is involved in the entire span of assault operations. Prior to an assault, they prep the battlespace, including doing armed reconnaissance. They support fixed wing aircraft in a deep air support role, and when the Ospreys and CH-53s advance to the objective area, they provide an air escort role. With Marines in the objective area, they provide direct ground support for ground movement working directly with the Ground Combat Element.