

# **The US-Taiwan Joint Military Exercise and its Policy Implication: A Comparative Perspective with ROK-US Joint Military Exercise**

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Unlike South Korea, Taiwan has neither any formal mechanism nor mutual defense treaty in place to conduct joint military exercises with the US. Facing a growing Chinese threat, Taiwan can only endeavor to strengthen its military relations with the US and increase its own defense capability. Above all, the question of how the US-Taiwan joint military exercise can be fulfilled is a matter of urgency.

It is noteworthy that President Trump recently signed the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) which has clauses on strengthening the US defense partnership with Taiwan. The act not only reinforces commitments to support Taiwan's defense but also lists the Sense of Congress which includes inviting Taiwan to participate in military exercises.

Military exercises are designed to evaluate and improve combined and joint coordination, procedures, plans, equipment, and systems for holding contingency operations between allied militaries. On a practical level, they help to increase interoperability and to examine scenarios for different contingencies. On a political level, they are a form of intimation to domestic and potential rivals.

It is in America's interest to ensure that Taiwan has the confidence needed to pursue national survival without fear of Chinese intimidation. For Taiwan, such confidence can only come from having a strong military, vouchsafed by the US. Therefore it is essential to have joint military exercises between the US and Taiwan. In case of war, Taiwanese and American soldiers may need to face the enemy together, but without close cooperation between them that can be achieved only through the

joint military exercise.

Consequently, Taiwan is obligated to bear any cost attached to the proposed joint exercise. After a series of media campaign and arms deterrent, tensions across the Strait have risen particularly following an incident in which Chinese jets and a Liaoning aircraft carrier executed “island encirclement patrols” around Taiwan, and China unilaterally changed aviation corridors M503 over Taiwan in protest. A senior Chinese diplomat even threateningly said: “The day that a U.S. Navy vessel arrives in [a Taiwanese port], is the day that the People’s Liberation Army unites Taiwan with military force.”

Apparently China is leveraging the joint exercise and the US’ s countermove as a means of justifying Beijing’ s game-changing provocative acts on land, at sea, and in air. But the domineering manner of China’ s strategic moves may prove unfavorable and have a counterproductive effect where the more China attempts to sabotage the status quo across the Taiwan Strait, the more likely the US and other countries in the region would come to Taiwan’ s aid to balance the real China threat.

The policy implications derived from above are as follows: on the one hand, participating in joint exercises could serve both important military and political purposes for Taiwan. The training that Taiwan’ s military would receive from exposure and coordination with American armed forces would be invaluable not only for the officers’ experiences, but also for boosting morale. Furthermore, it would send a clear signal to Beijing as well as to US allies and partners that, while the US seeks to work with China where it can, it will stand by its alliances and its partnerships.

On the other, as the weakest player in the scenario, Taiwan’ s biggest nightmare is being abandoned by the US or China’ s breaking through the US’ s extended deterrence. To avoid such outcomes, Taiwan can attempt to build more than one set of extended deterrence to disperse the risk of failed alliance. Being suppressed by China, Taiwan has not been able to form formal alliances with any global or regional powers; therefore, active engagement with the US or even India, Vietnam, Australia, Japan, and South Korea would create uncertainty for China in terms of using force.

In contrast, the current situation on the Korean peninsula in many respects parallels the situation that confronts Taiwan. North Korea likewise is “punching with nudging,” using the ROK-US joint military exercise and US antagonism as a means of justifying Pyongyang’ s nuclear weapons programs hinting that joint military exercises can do little to bring about greater security and they only increase the probability of war.

North Korea, whether faithfully or not, continues to perceive the joint exercises as designed to prepare preemptive US nuclear attack on Pyongyang; therefore justifies that “the DPRK’ s development and testing of its own nuclear bomb and missiles are a matter of self-defense and are within their prerogative as a sovereign nation,” thereby misleading public opinion to believe that the

joint exercises can only serve to increase tension and insecurity on the Peninsula.

In addition, backed into a corner by international sanctions, Pyongyang can only devote itself to thwart the US' s intervention and to acquire the most interest from Seoul at the lowest cost under the precondition of regime survival. While faced with the US' s extended deterrence, invading Seoul is definitely not beneficial; instead, drawing Seoul away from Washington and back to a bilateral scenario may be the best option. Alternatively, if excluding the US proves too arduous, neutralizing its intervention may be the second most beneficial for Pyongyang at this stage.

The argument above may explain to great extent the motivations behind Kim Jong Un' s recent game in joining Winter Olympics in South Korea. For the sake of prudence, Seoul cannot rule out the possibility that Pyongyang is merely using the thaw in inter-Korean relations to buy time to further improve its nuclear and missile capabilities and discourage the United States from taking new hardline actions.

In the same vein, it is likely that the annual joint military exercises between the US and South Korea could be a major element in future negotiations with North Korea, but given their contribution to military readiness and political stability, there is no reason to terminate them. Of course this bottom-line would be contrary to North Korea' s wishes of seeing the annual joint exercises dissolved.

In the end, because China is against almost every other military alliance in the region, whether it is bilateral or multilateral, targeted at China or not, it is imperative for the US to conduct the joint exercises with South Korea and Taiwan separately in ways that are clearly visible to Beijing and Pyongyang as defensive in nature and as unthreatening a manner as possible. After all, whether China will dictate the terms regarding such problems is a matter of peace and war on the Peninsula and across the Taiwan Strait.

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