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## THE RISE OF THE MILITARY PARTNERSHIP AMONG RUSSIA, CHINA, AND NORTH KOREA

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Over the past decade, realism has dominated the international order. This is particularly true in Northeast Asia, where an arms race is escalating between the People’s Republic of China (PRC), the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK), the Republic of Korea (ROK), the United States, Russia, and Japan. As the international community continues its efforts to resolve the ongoing conflicts in Ukraine and the Middle East, it is preparing for the possibility that the next crisis might begin in Northeast Asia.

During the Biden administration, the ROK-U.S. alliance emphasized extended deterrence to preclude any need for South Korea to develop its own nuclear arsenal, while the historic Camp David Summit strengthened the trilateral security partnership between the United States, the ROK, and Japan. Although the Trump administration has so far reaffirmed U.S. support for this trilateral security partnership, the possibility of another summit between Donald Trump and Kim Jong-un is a wild card in U.S.-ROK relations.

However, the biggest factor reshaping the Northeast Asian security environment is the growing security and military partnership among Russia, China, and North Korea. Russia officially invited the DPRK to join the combined military exercises between the Russian Armed Forces and the People’s Liberation Army. North Korea has blamed the United States and the trilateral U.S.-ROK-Japan security partnership for its decision to send Korean People’s Army (KPA) soldiers to fight in the Russia-Ukraine war. Given this context, trilateral military exercises between Russia, China, and North Korea seem nearly inevitable. If the international community sees KPA soldiers and a DPRK flag in the Russia-China combined military exercises, it will pose a serious threat to the strategic stability of Northeast Asia.

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## New Threats to Regional Stability

Over the decades, the ROK-U.S. military exercises have naturally focused on the threats of a North Korean invasion of the South and the intervention of a neighboring country to support North Korea. However, in these scenarios the ROK and the United States have never treated a trilateral military partnership among Russia, the PRC, and the DPRK as a direct threat. Until a few years ago, China and Russia were important partners in imposing international sanctions on North Korea for its nuclear and missile tests and were members of the six-party talks. In recent years, however, the UN panel of experts on North Korea ended, and Russia and China have declined to support international sanctions on the Kim Jong-un regime. Instead, they have grown closer to North Korea and are now potential military partners of the DPRK during a crisis on the Korean Peninsula.

The ROK-U.S. security alliance has not prepared for the possibility of a Russia-PRC-DPRK military partnership during combined field exercises and even tabletop exercises. ROK-U.S. military preparedness has instead focused on North Korea's potential use of nuclear weapons in an early stage of a war, particularly tactical nuclear weapons, rather than on Russian military intervention in areas of the Korean Peninsula or the deployment of Russian tactical nuclear weapons or missiles in support of KPA soldiers.

As a result, efforts to increase ROK-U.S. military preparedness should expand from their focus on North Korean nuclear, missile, and conventional threats to cover the possibility of a Russian military intervention in a crisis on the Korean Peninsula, including air, naval, and ground forces and direct cyber, nuclear, and missile support to North Korea. At the same time, the ROK, the United States, and Japan should continue to seek diplomatic channels for

dissuade China and Russia from engaging in North Korea's military adventures on the Korean Peninsula.

More broadly, the ROK, the United States, Japan, and other potential security partners, such as NATO, Australia, and members of the UN Command, should prepare for all possible scenarios to prevent an extended regional war from erupting on the Korean Peninsula. Of particular concern, a possible Russian intervention that targets U.S. forces in South Korea and Japan would upend strategic stability in the region. The rise of a Russia-PRC-DPRK military partnership thus presents a new Korean Peninsula crisis scenario.

## Policy Options

Even as diplomatic efforts to maintain peace and stability in Northeast Asia continue to be important, military preparedness must be a top priority for the ROK-U.S. alliance. To this end, both countries should consider the following policy options.

First, the ROK-U.S. combined exercises should have more partners. Participation should be expanded to include not only key Indo-Pacific countries, such as Japan and Australia, but also NATO countries and UN Command members.

Second, ROK-U.S. military preparedness should look beyond the North Korean threat and directly cover the threat from the cooperation among China, Russia, and North Korea in the region. This threat of a trilateral military partnership is serious, and South Korea and the United States should prepare for it through diverse scenarios and exercises.

Third, to improve overall ROK-U.S. military preparedness, soldiers and experts from both countries need more opportunities for training, education, and discussion. These activities could even include participants from other partners like Japan and NATO. ~