

Balancing Act: Military Diplomacy and Deterrence on the Korean Peninsula

By Lt. Col. Matthew House

The Korean Peninsula, shaped by historical grievances, ideological divides, and contemporary geopolitical tensions—including North Korea’s alleged military support for Russia’s war with Ukraine and South Korea’s tense political situation—stands out as a heavily militarized and strategically crucial region. Under the scrutiny of the United States and positioned between major powers—China, Japan, and Russia—the peninsula’s military dynamics profoundly influence regional and global security. The legacy of the Korean War is omnipresent. While it concluded with an armistice on July 27, 1953, and established the Korean Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), no peace treaty was signed, leaving the Koreas technically at War. Thus, balancing military diplomacy and military deterrence is crucial in managing tensions between North and South Korea. This article explores the roles of military diplomacy and deterrence on the Korean Peninsula, highlighting positive steps as well as pitfalls. This give and take is captured in the adoption, suspension, and eventual breakdown of the [9/19 Comprehensive Military Agreement \(CMA\)](#).

Military Diplomacy on the Korean Peninsula

Military diplomacy uses military resources and personnel to achieve diplomatic objectives, often aiming to prevent conflict and build trust between adversaries. On the Korean Peninsula, military diplomacy has played a significant role in reducing tensions and fostering dialogue. One of the most notable recent achievements in military diplomacy was the signing of the CMA on September 19, 2018. The agreement was part of the broader [Panmunjom Declaration](#) adopted during the inter-Korean summit. Its central aim was to reduce military tensions and build trust through confidence-building measures. Notable provisions of the CMA included the demilitarization of the Joint Security Area (JSA), the establishment of a Ceasefire Zone; the establishment of buffer zones along the land and sea borders, removal of guard posts within the JSA, demining operations; and the restoration of open military communication channels.

These measures represented significant steps towards reducing military tensions and fostering cooperation. The demilitarization of the JSA symbolized a tangible commitment to peace and reconciliation.

The Breakdown of the 9/19 CMA

Despite the promising start, the 9/19 CMA eventually broke down, leading to its [partial suspension in 2023](#) and [full suspension in 2024](#). Several factors contributed to this outcome, highlighting the challenges of sustaining military diplomacy amid ongoing provocations and mistrust. Since signing the CMA, North Korea has violated the CMA 17 times, as documented in South Korea’s [2022 Defense White Paper](#). These instances included several occasions of coastal artillery fire in the maritime buffer zone. Additionally, toward the end of 2023, North Korea attempted to put its first military spy satellite into space. These violations heightened tensions and created an atmosphere of distrust, leading to South Korea’s [partial suspension](#) of the CMA.

In June 2024, the incident where North Korea sent [1,000 trash-filled balloons](#) into South Korea was the final provocation that led to South Korea’s full suspension of the CMA. This act violated the agreement and posed environmental and public health risks to South Korea. Serious transgressions, such as North Korea’s

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military support for Russia in Ukraine, significantly diminish the likelihood of any CMA-like agreement being reached in the near future.

Military Deterrence on the Korean Peninsula

In contrast to military diplomacy, military deterrence involves the threat of military force to prevent adversaries from taking undesirable actions. North Korea possesses one of the world's largest armies, with 1.2 million active personnel and advanced conventional weaponry concentrated along the JSA. It emphasizes asymmetric warfare, cyber capabilities, and a growing arsenal of ballistic missiles and nuclear weapons with regional and potentially intercontinental reach. On the other hand, South Korea fields a technologically advanced force of 600,000 troops supported by US forces totaling 24,000+. It focuses on modernizing with advanced tanks, aircraft, naval vessels, and missile defense systems to counter North Korean threats. Military deterrence has played a vital role in maintaining a fragile armistice on the Korean Peninsula.

The US-South Korea alliance is an ironclad partnership and a cornerstone of military deterrence on the Korean Peninsula. Regular joint military exercises, advanced military capabilities, and the presence of US troops in South Korea serve as a strong deterrent against North Korean aggression. These measures reassure South Korea and signal to North Korea that any aggression will be met with a formidable response.

International sanctions and economic pressure have also served as critical components of military deterrence against North Korea. These measures aim to constrain North Korea's ability to develop and deploy military capabilities, particularly its nuclear and missile programs. By limiting resources and imposing economic costs, sanctions deter North Korea from pursuing aggressive actions. North Korea's military alliance with Russia, solidified through a mutual defense pact in 2024, further exacerbates regional security challenges, underscoring the need for enhanced deterrence measures by South Korea and its allies.

Balancing Military Diplomacy and Deterrence

The challenge on the Korean Peninsula lies in finding the right balance between military diplomacy and deterrence. While both approaches have their merits, they must be carefully calibrated to address the complexities of inter-Korean relations. Military diplomacy is essential for building trust and creating a foundation for lasting peace. Confidence-building measures, such as those outlined in the 9/19 CMA, are crucial for reducing tensions and fostering dialogue. However, trust-building efforts must be sustained and supported by consistent and genuine actions from both sides. Military deterrence remains necessary to prevent aggression and ensure security. The presence of a strong deterrent force can provide the stability needed for diplomatic efforts to succeed. However, excessive reliance on deterrence can also escalate tensions and provoke aggressive responses.

[Inter-Korean summits and US-North Korea dialogues](#) have sought to reduce military tensions and explore denuclearization, albeit with limited tangible progress. However, high-profile meetings between North Korean leader Kim Jong Un and Russian President Vladimir Putin in June 2024, where the two countries signed a pact that includes a [mutual defense clause](#), highlight the intricate and volatile dynamics of the region. North Korea's unpredictable actions and rhetoric challenge diplomatic efforts, underscoring the need for robust deterrence and strategic patience. South Korea's domestic political instability further complicates efforts to balance diplomacy and deterrence, underscoring the need for a unified approach amid the volatile inter-Korean and broader regional dynamics.

A comprehensive approach that balances military diplomacy and deterrence is crucial in navigating the complex and volatile landscape of the Korean Peninsula. The 9/19 CMA represented a significant step towards peace through military diplomacy. Still, its breakdown highlighted the challenges of sustaining trust and cooperation in the face of provocations and violations. Military deterrence, embodied by the US-South Korea alliance, remains essential for maintaining security and preventing aggression. Both approaches must work together to create an environment conducive to peace and stability.

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