

# Commentary



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## Like it or not, the Korean peninsula is a key defence priority for Ottawa

**Andrew Erskine**

**If asked to list examples** of global threats that are consequential to Canada's defence, Canadians will highlight the Russo-Ukrainian war, Sudan's domestic conflict between state and paramilitary forces, and China's domestic meddling and continental reconnaissance. This transformational shift in the outlooks of Canadians is vital for understanding how the current moment in history – where the international rules-based order is becoming unsteady and more hostile-looking – impacts Canada's national defence interests.

However, Canadians remain instinctively unfamiliar with the consequences emerging from the Korean peninsula.

With Ottawa proclaiming its geostrategic focus towards protecting Canadians against Chinese and Russian revisionist and revanchist attitudes, and from the threat of climate change, the security and stability of the Korean peninsula gets little focus in Canada's defence strategies. Aside from indicating its longstanding undertaking of UN sanctions against North Korea through Operation NEON,

and stressing the importance of South Korea as a key partner for Canada's Indo-Pacific Strategy and global democratic governance, the peninsula is not underscored by Ottawa as a pressing geostrategic region for Canadian national defence. As a result, Canadians do not see the need for military engagement on the peninsula as an immediate priority.

Canadians cannot be blamed for this lack of attention, as Ottawa and its like-minded partners have pushed the narrative of China being the genuine challenger emerging from the Indo-Pacific. Although this narrative is accurate and requires Ottawa's full attention, it must not narrow Canada's ability to perceive additional threats from other disruptive powers. Canadians must perceive the peninsula as a vital geostrategic interest of Canada's Indo-Pacific Strategy and its continental security. Despite a carefully crafted ceasefire in place since 1953, the armistice between North and South Korea is not guaranteed to last. Given Pyongyang's constant steps to modernize its nuclear capabilities, and South Korea's determination to defend itself by approaching Washington for greater deterrence capabilities, even considering acquiring nuclear weapons, the peninsula could become the centre for a massive nuclear conflict.



*The armistice between North and South Korea is not guaranteed to last.*

Since coming to power, Kim Jong Un has exacerbated Pyongyang's longstanding ideology of confronting its 'main enemy' South Korea, the "imperialist aggressor" the US, and the "colonial plunderer" Japan. Canada –given its strong bilateral relations with South Korea and Japan and our deep-rooted friendship with the US –has been described by North Korea as a "bat-blind US follower." This characterization should not be dismissed, particularly given North Korea's growing capabilities with nuclear intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM).

In a recent military parade, Pyongyang displayed the Hwasong-17 missile, which can carry three nuclear warheads, each with a yield of at least 230 kilotons. This weapon can reach North America and inflict casualties of up to three million people in urban areas and up to one million people in rural areas. Kim also announced plans to build 30 KN-25 missile launchers, each carrying

six missiles equipped with a tactical nuclear warhead, with a range of 400 kilometers. Combined with Kim's blazoning of a first-strike policy, launching nuclear missiles to deter nuclear attacks from the US; the threat to North Korea's leadership, people, or existence; or to turn the tide of war in its favour, an erratic Pyongyang persists in showcasing that it is willing to do anything and everything to maintain the optics of regime control, power, and prestige.

Against these realities, it is time for Ottawa to acknowledge the threats from the Korean peninsula on Canada's defence interests at home and abroad. In particular, Ottawa must strategize against a North Korean ICBM targeting and striking mainland Canada and the US. Whether by design or error, a direct strike on Canadian territory will generate insurmountable damage to lives, infrastructure, and agriculture. Even an indirect strike in US territory will impact Canadian security by having radioactive fallout creep into Canadian territory, and exhausting the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) who are used laboriously for domestic emergency operations and could also be responding to American calls for assistance, accommodating populations that have been injured and dispersed from the attack.

There would also be major implications for NORAD, the binational military command for North America that is responsible for aerospace control, warning, and defence. As NORAD would be the first to detect an ICBM launch from Pyongyang, a direct or indirect strike would raise concerns over the organization's effectiveness in detecting and countering a missile strike. Concerns would also extend to US and Canadian readiness in identifying and carrying out operations to safely and effectively neutralize an ICBM over North American cities, populations, and vital infrastructure. Given the recent surveillance balloon incidents in February, when Ottawa required the assistance of two US fighter jets to shoot down balloons over Canadian territory, Canada can no longer expect extra-regional threats to solely impact the US. Moreover, Ottawa must acknowledge any gaps in its continental defence strategies and capabilities that would hinder US readiness and operational decision-making if Pyongyang launches multiple ICBMs.

Canada's defence interests in the Indo-Pacific will also be impacted if conventional or nuclear war breaks out on the peninsula. Given our historical commitment as a signatory to the *Korean Armistice Agreement*, Ottawa maintains a military presence on the peninsula as part of the UN Command Military Armistice Commission. Should the Korean ceasefire unravel, Canada would be responsible for supplying military personnel with the needed

equipment, armaments, and additional military forces to help defend South Korean, Japanese, and American forces on the peninsula. Ottawa would also need to arrange evacuation missions for Canadian citizens in South Korea and potentially Japan. Given the recent development in Sudan, Ottawa is ill-equipped to provide any such operations for its citizens.

Moreover, if Pyongyang were successful in deterring America from defending South Korea in lieu of nuclear strikes on American cities, China and Russia would be emboldened to increase their nuclear posture by amplifying their nuclear arsenal and first-use policies to remove the US from any defence responsibilities that obstruct Beijing from acquiring Taiwan or Moscow advancing its claims on the Kuril Islands. Such scenarios would further erode a rules-based system and nuclear non-proliferation in the Indo-Pacific, features that a non-nuclear power, which has strained relations with China, Russia, and North Korea, as well as a frail military posture, rely on to advance its defence interests in the region.



*Ottawa needs to better manage its engagement on the Korean peninsula.*

For Ottawa to become a stakeholder in peninsular defence, Ottawa needs to better manage its engagement on the Korean peninsula by aligning its military capabilities and force posture with regional allies. Although Minister Joly visited South Korea in April and promised to progress the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership and unscored the extension of the CAF participation in Operation NEON until 2026, Ottawa is out of step with the US, Japan, and South Korea, all of whom are increasing their military size and deterrence capabilities through unilateral, bilateral and multilateral endeavors. Canada, meanwhile, remains determined to instead put resources towards its participation in UN operations that have produced little change in Pyongyang's nuclear posturing.

To showcase a bona fide interest in engaging the peninsula, Ottawa must develop short-term and long-term objectives that build upon the current and future capabilities of CAF. To better access allied military infrastructure,

operational thinking, and force interoperability, Ottawa should pursue a Status of Force Agreement (SOFA) with Seoul to permanently station CAF personnel, equipment, and assets – fighter jets and naval vessels – in South Korea. From here, Ottawa and Seoul would be better positioned to discuss other operational items like constructing military bases to house and store the CAF for long-term deployments.

Once it has a genuine footprint on the peninsula, Ottawa's military leadership must work alongside its American, Japanese, and South Korean counterparts in determining which domain of warfare the CAF can contribute to peninsular defence. A good prospect to gauge CAF's defence capabilities with that of its allies would be to join a Ballistic Missile Defence (BMD) drill that focuses on mastering response procedures to a North Korean ICBM provocation. In these drills, Ottawa should dispatch two Halifax-class frigates, a flight of CF-18 fighter jets and a set of CP-140 Aurora long-range patrol aircrafts. The deployment of these forces would provide insightful logistics for how Ottawa can deploy the Canadian Surface Combatant vessels (CSC) and F-35 fighter jets to the Indo-Pacific for future drills and rotations while demonstrating its resolve to militarily commit to the peninsula's defence.

From there, Ottawa should pursue a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) for co-manning military assets belonging to Japan, South Korea, or America during joint exercises that are lacking personnel in key military domain areas. Seeing as there is a shortage in acute personnel in the militaries of each trilateral member, an agreement of this type would complement each country's military forces by deepening military relations, enhancing the forces' overall interoperability and ensure that the advanced weapons systems onboard ships, aircraft and on land are operational by having qualified and experienced personnel stationed in key roles.

For Canada, co-manning lacking domains offers opportune tactical and logistical planning transfers from the trilateral partnership to detect, survey, and counter missiles launched from North Korea. Moreover, it can offer CAF a detailed assessment of military domains that Ottawa may need to acquire or master to better participate in peninsular defence. For instance, the latest BMD drill sought to test the capabilities of the Aegis Combat Systems, a total weapon apparatus that performs search, track, and missile guidance functions while being able to detect more than 100 targets. For CAF, co-manning vessels with this equipment should be a chief priority as the Aegis Combat System will be the apparatus installed on the fifteen CSC.

Lastly, Canada must regularize a military-to-military relationship with South Korea for peninsular defence. In particular, Ottawa should capitalize on the increasing need for binational defence innovation and procurement and pursue a MOU with Seoul on logistic and defence industry cooperation that will remove barriers between the two countries for greater defence supply chain integration and more joint research and manufacturing for cutting-edge defence technologies. The MOU should include passages on Seoul purchasing Canadian critical minerals and resources needed for weapon modernization, as per its Three-Pillar System defence policy and its goal of attaining next-generation defence technology. Moreover, there should be collaboration between Canadian and South Korean defence companies to co-develop and co-share specific military projects for peninsular defence, including space-based robotics, telecommunications and sensing systems and satellites.

In laying out the desire to become a more active and engaged partner in the Indo-Pacific, Canada must see the Korean peninsula as a vital defence interest. The creeping threat from Pyongyang should make it clear that Ottawa can no longer shift the responsibility for continental and extra-regional defence to other allies because –in a nuclear conflict –North Korea will not distinguish a South Korean, Japanese, or American from a Canadian. [MLI](#)

## About the author



**Andrew Erskine** is a Young Fellow with the Institute for Peace and Diplomacy, a research analyst with the NATO Association of Canada and a researcher with the Consortium of Indo-Pacific Researchers. [MLI](#)

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323 Chapel Street, Suite 300,  
Ottawa, Ontario K1N 7Z2  
613-482-8327 • [info@macdonaldlaurier.ca](mailto:info@macdonaldlaurier.ca)

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