



CENTRE FOR AIR POWER STUDIES

In Focus

New Delhi

CAPS InFocus: 57/2022

09 August 2022

Playing Fire With Fire, Seoul Backs Pre-Emptive Strike Strategy on North's N2C

Anubhav Shankar Goswami

Research Associate, Centre for Air Power Studies

Keywords: Kill Chain, South Korea, North Korea, Pre-emptive strike



Image Source: REUTERS



Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS]

This work is licensed under Creative Commons Attribution – Non-Commercial – No Derivatives 4.0 International License.

Recent media reports covering the Korean Peninsula have flagged the dangerous escalatory words coming from the top leadership in North Korea. Reportedly, Kim Jong-Un is warning that the Korean peninsula is "on the brink of war" due to the new and more aggressive defence policy laid out by South Korea's new President, Yoon Suk-yeol.¹ The South is tailoring its defence policy to allow its forces to attack North pre-emptively if Seoul is under the impression that Pyongyang could launch a *first strike*. Called the 'Kill Chain' strategy, it would allow Seoul to hit North Korean targets with air strikes and ballistic missiles to take out Pyongyang's nuclear command and control (N2C) structures. In other words, pre-emptive strikes could target the top leadership of the North, including Kim Jong-Un.

Experts, however, believe that preparing for pre-emptive strikes to deter any North Korean nuclear attack will exacerbate the arms race and risk miscalculation on the Korean peninsula.

Background

After Pyongyang's fifth nuclear test in September 2016, the South Korean military decided to deal with the growing security concerns by using a three-pronged defence system. They include the Kill Chain pre-emptive strike system, the Korean Air and Missile Defence (KAMD) and the Korea Massive Punishment and Retaliation (KMPR) plan. "Kill Chain is a system to carry out a pre-emptive strike against Pyongyang's nuclear and missile facilities if Seoul is faced with an imminent threat, while the KAMD would trace and shoot down North Korean ballistic missiles heading for South Korea. The KMPR would be used to punish and retaliate against North Korea if it strikes South Korea", writes one commentator.²

With North Korea ramping up its nuclear facilities, including testing of hypersonic missiles, Seoul's response time to a pending time is increasingly narrowing down. As a result, Kill Chain is emerging as a clear favourite strategy among the new administration.

What Constitutes South Korea's Kill Chain?

There are two components of the Kill Chain: strategy and capability. To institutionalise the Kill Chain strategy, Yoon's administration has announced the setting up of a Strategic Command by 2024 to oversee the creation of a new command structure in order to bring synergy between the weapons to be used in the Kill Chain and other systems of the South Korean forces for deterrence enhancement.³

As far as capability is concerned, Kill Chain system's core is composed of surveillance assets, including reconnaissance satellites and cruise missiles. South Korea's Ministry of National Defence said the military will soon deploy Intelligence, Surveillance, Reconnaissance (ISR)-based assets needed for the operationalisation of the Kill Chain. However, frequent delays in deploying five surveillance satellites between 2021 and 2022 have forced South Korea to consider leasing a reconnaissance satellite, "possibly from Israel or other countries, to independently obtain information on the North's military activities".⁴ So far, Washington provided Seoul with military information about the North's nuclear and missile-related activities collected through its space-based assets.

Meanwhile, the Hyunmoo missile series plays a crucial role in Seoul's Kill Chain pre-emptive strike system.⁵ Giving more details on the missile, Caleb Larson writes:

*"The Hyunmoo-3 series is a family of missiles that generally fall into the short-to-medium range, though the latest Hyunmoo, the Hyunmoo-3D, would be considered more of a longer-range missile. South Korea is bound by a 2001 agreement with the United States that bars the development of missiles with a range (of) over 300 kilometres and a warhead (of) over 500 kilograms in weight. Cruise missiles, on the other hand, are not covered by that agreement—a cause of great utility to the Hyunmoo-series missiles."*⁶

The South Korean military is also equipped with Taurus cruise missiles that are meant to destroy the underground nuclear and missile facilities of the North. In a report published in the Korea Times, Jun Ji-hye sheds light on what Taurus can do:

*"The GPS-guided Taurus KEPD 350K — to be used with the ROK Air Force's F-15K fighter jets — has a range of 500 kilometres and can perform deep-penetration missions with pinpoint accuracy, making it ideal for taking out hard targets such as underground installations and bridges. Once deployed, South Korean pilots will be able to hit strategic targets with great precision without entering North Korean airspace, the Air Force said"*⁷.

Apart from these assets, Kill Chain could also include Seoul's ever-expanding list of ballistic missiles, F-35A stealth fighters, and new submarines.

Kill Chain: A 'Catch-22' Trap?

The Kill Chain system is often regarded as a logical deterrent strategy since the idea of leadership decapitation has its merit. But it has an in-built 'catch-22': it can either deter Kim from attacking the

South or prompt him to take drastic measures to maintain the upper hand over Seoul. In a tweet, Jeffrey Lewis, a missile researcher at the James Martin Center for Non-proliferation Studies, claimed that, "This is the *military* plan that is most likely to succeed."⁸ He also later added that "it is also the option most likely to create uncontrollable escalation dynamics and start a nuclear war."⁹

Ankit Panda of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace similarly flags the destabilizing nature of an implicit threat against Kim Jong-Un's life. After all, a decapitation strike may force Kim to "adopt more dangerous command and control practices in a crisis, such as delegating nuclear authority so North Korea's weapons can be used even if he is killed".¹⁰ Moreover, there are reports emerging that North Korea is now testing hypersonic missiles which are allegedly tipped with tactical nuclear weapons (TNWs); assets that can significantly reduce the time Seoul would have to respond to a pending attack.

'Eagle' in the Room

What could irk the South Koreans in their Kill Chain strategy could be the United States' potential refusal to go ahead with a pre-emptive strike against North Korea. According to a former U.S official, "To conduct a pre-emptive strike would not be an act of self-defence, and by definition, this would fall under the category of an Alliance decision".¹¹ The official added that "firing unprovoked on North Korea would be a major violation of the Armistice Agreement in force since the 1950-1953 Korean War ended without an official peace treaty".¹² However, according to Mark Esper, a former U.S. Secretary of Defence under the Trump administration, self-defence is a fundamental principle that includes pre-emptive strikes if necessary. He was of the opinion that, "If we had clear intelligence that North Korea was going to launch a nuclear attack on Seoul, that would be a scenario that certainly a pre-emptive strike might be warranted".¹³

The Pentagon has so far declined to comment on how are they going to coordinate with the South Koreans on future military planning as well as assets deployment. Therefore, looking ahead, it will be interesting to see whether the Biden administration will include Kill Chain as part of the alliance force posture.

NOTES:

¹ Melissa Zhu, "Kim Jong-un says North Korea ready to mobilise nuclear forces", *BBC News*, July 28, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-62329125>. Accessed on July 28, 2022.

² Jun Ji-hye, "3 military systems to counter N. Korea: Kill Chain, KAMD, KMPR", *Korea Times*, November 1, 2016, https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2016/11/205_217259.html. Accessed on July 28, 2022.

³ ANI, "South Korea stands firm on 'kill chain plans' to counter North's nuclear threat", *ThePrint*, July 26, 2022, <https://theprint.in/world/south-korea-stands-firm-on-kill-chain-plans-to-counter-norths-nuclear-threat/1055860/>. Accessed on July 28, 2022.

⁴ Ji-hye, "3 military systems to", n 2.

⁵ Caleb Larson, "If North Korea Attacked the South, Would Seoul Strike with Cruise Missiles?", *National Interest*, July 21, 2020, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/korea-watch/if-north-korea-attacked-south-would-seoul-strike-cruise-missiles-165239>. Accessed on July 28, 2022.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ji-hye, "3 military systems to", n 2.

⁸ Josh Smith, "South Korea doubles down on risky 'Kill Chain' plans to counter North Korea nuclear threat", *Reuters*, July 26, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/skorea-doubles-down-risky-kill-chain-plans-counter-nkorea-nuclear-threat-2022-07-26/>. Accessed on July 29, 2022.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.