



## THE NECESSITY OF PREEMPTIVE KILL CHAIN OPERATIONS USING THE F-35

Lieutenant-Colonel Jihwan Jeong

### JCSP 50

#### Service Paper

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**Lieutenant-Colonel Jihwan Jeong**

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## **THE NECESSITY OF PREEMPTIVE KILL CHAIN OPERATIONS USING THE F-35**

### **AIM**

The area of nuclear war, which is completely distinct from conventional war, has created a new strategic area called nuclear strategy where existing military strategies do not apply due to its enormous destructive power, and has functioned in its own way since the end of World War II. Nuclear weapons have been prevented from being used in war. However, North Korea's nuclear strategy indeed follows a different path from that of other countries, and as a result, it currently poses a significant security threat to the world, including South Korea and the United States. The purpose of this service paper is to explain the necessity of a preemptive kill chain operation using the F-35 when detecting North Korea's nuclear activities. To this end, various considerations and appropriate analyses are needed regarding relations with the United States, North Korea's nuclear capabilities and the possibility of nuclear use, and realistic countermeasures possible with South Korea's military power.

### **INTRODUCTION**

North Korea's threat is at its peak. In a speech on September 9, 2022, Kim Jong-un legislated North Korea's nuclear weapons as a means of pre-emptive strike, saying, "Nuclear force is the destiny and eternal dignity of our country and people."<sup>1</sup> In addition, in his speech on January 15, 2024, he stated that unification with South Korea is no longer possible and that the Constitution must be revised to designate South Korea as the 'principal enemy', adding that if the enemies even spark a war, the Republic would sternly punish our enemies by mobilizing all of its military might, including nuclear weapons.<sup>2</sup> In response to this, South Korea's President Yoon Seok Yeol is taking a hard line, saying that he will retaliate strongly against North Korea's provocations.<sup>3</sup> As a result, looking at the recent situation on the Korean Peninsula, the security threat is so serious that it can be called the greatest crisis in history, and an appropriate response is urgently needed.

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<sup>1</sup> Josh Smith. 2022. "New North Korea Law Outlines Nuclear Arms Use, Including Preemptive Strikes." *Reuters*, Sep 9. <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/nkorea-passes-law-declaring-itself-nuclear-weapons-state-kcna-2022-09-08/>.

<sup>2</sup> Oliver Slow. 2024. "North Korea's Kim Jong Un Abandons Unification Goal with South." *BBC News*, Jan 16. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-67990948/>.

<sup>3</sup> Geeta Pillai. 2024. "South Korea to Retaliate 'Multiple Times Stronger' to Future North Korean Provocations." *BNN Breaking*, Jan 16. <https://bnnbreaking.com/politics/south-korea-to-retaliate-multiple-times-stronger-to-future-north-korean-provocations/>.

## DISCUSSION

### Relations with the United States

Through the 'Washington Declaration' on April 26, 2023, and the 'ROK-US Security Consultative Meeting (SCM)' on November 13 of the same year, the United States emphasized extended deterrence, including nuclear assets, for the defense of Korea based on the firm ROK-US alliance. However, as the possibility of Trump re-entering the White House this year increases, questions are rising about whether the ROK-US alliance will continue. He mentioned the possibility of withdrawing U.S. troops from South Korea due to the issue of sharing defense costs during his tenure,<sup>4</sup> and raised the unfairness of providing South Korea and Japan with a nuclear umbrella through extended deterrence by investing a huge amount of money from the United States, and suggested that they should develop their nuclear weapons.<sup>5</sup> Bolton, who also served as national security adviser during Trump's administration, is confident that Trump's re-election will have a further negative impact on relations between North Korea and South Korea.<sup>6</sup>

What should we do if America's allies, including Korea, are facing nuclear threats and have doubts about America's extended deterrence? The most popular and logical answer is to develop nuclear weapons at home. Renowned scholar Hans Morgenthau argued that non-nuclear states cannot stand up to nuclear-armed states with conventional forces and must surrender or accept destruction. In fact, France and Britain developed their own nuclear weapons in the 1950s to counter the Soviet nuclear threat. However, this nuclear armament plan became very difficult to adopt after the adoption of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in 1968. In particular, it has become difficult to secure key nuclear materials such as plutonium and highly enriched uranium (HEU). No U.S. ally has attempted nuclear armament since the NPT.<sup>7</sup> In the current situation, the most ideal way to respond to North Korea's nuclear weapons is to develop a 'comprehensive customized deterrence' strategy by combining the United States extended deterrence and South Korea's non-nuclear strategy, Kill Chain. However, in a situation where it is realistically impossible to possess nuclear weapons, the military's only response is a kill chain, assuming that extended deterrence from the United States is not provided.<sup>8</sup> This is the first reason why we must continue to develop our kill chain.

### North Korea's nuclear capabilities

North Korea conducted six explosive nuclear tests between 2006 and 2017. The most recent test generated the largest explosive yield. The test was estimated to have released at least 140 kilotons of energy, approximately 7-10 times more than the bombs dropped in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. And in September 2022, IAEA Secretary-General Rafael Grossi evaluated that North Korea's nuclear test sites have resumed and that preparations for the seventh nuclear test

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<sup>4</sup> Min-ho Jung. 2022. "Pulling US Troops Out of Korea was Trump's Second-Term Priority, Esper's Memoir Reveals." *The Korea Times*, Jun 15. [https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2022/06/205\\_331080.html](https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2022/06/205_331080.html).

<sup>5</sup> Stephanie Condon. 2016. "Donald Trump: Japan, South Korea Might Need Nuclear Weapons." *CBS News*, Mar 29. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/donald-trump-japan-south-korea-might-need-nuclear-weapons/>.

<sup>6</sup> Yonhap. 2024. "Bolton Warns Trump Could Seek 'Reckless' Deal on NK Nuclear Program if Reelected." *The Korea Herald*, Jan 31. <https://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20240131000118>.

<sup>7</sup> Hui-Rak Park. 2024. "A Non-Nuclear US Ally's Nuclear Preparedness Dilemma: South Korea's "Three-Axis System" *Defence Studies*: 1-20.

<sup>8</sup> Chang-Hee Park. 2017. "South Korea's Military Strategy to Counter North Korean Nuclear Threats." *Defense Policy Research* 26: 5-30.

have already been completed.<sup>9</sup> In addition, despite the challenging economic situation, North Korea conducted weapons tests such as the first ICBM missile test in 2022, the first solid-fuel missile test in 2023, and a solid-fuel missile with a hypersonic warhead in 2024, which experts called a significant technological innovation.<sup>10</sup> Solid-fuel missiles are easier to store and transport, more stable, and easier to launch, making them more difficult to preemptively detect and destroy. As a result, North Korea plans to use solid-fuel nuclear missiles through mobile launchers to shorten mission preparation time.<sup>11</sup>

So what is the appropriate response to these mobile launches? Deliberate targeting is not suitable for tracking moving targets, such as vehicles used to transport moving enemy combatants. For this reason, the U.S. Air Force has developed and improved time-sensitive and highly responsive dynamic targeting over the past 50 years. This not only makes it possible to respond to events unfolding in real-time but also enables accurate strikes against moving targets with high precision.<sup>12</sup> As a result, South Korea's strategy to respond to North Korea's nuclear use using mobile launchers must include a type of operation carried out by aircraft loitering above the expected missile operation area, that is, dynamic targeting (kill chain). The improvement of North Korea's nuclear capabilities, including mobile launchers, is the second reason why the kill chain must be developed.

### **North Korea's possible use of nuclear weapons**

In fact, it is not clear whether the North will use nuclear weapons in times of war. In reasonable terms, North Korea's use of nuclear weapons is a difficult choice, as it would have to prepare for its own destruction. However, North Korea is different from the ordinary country. "Kim Jong-un really will use nuclear weapons on the South Korean people," said Thae Yong-ho, a former North Korean diplomat stationed in Britain who defected to South Korea. "The nuclear and economic parallel adopted in 2013 is to instantly neutralize the South Korean military by turning it into a sea of fire by creating weapons of mass destruction, such as nuclear weapons."<sup>13</sup> In 2014, the North threatened the U.S. and Japan with nuclear missiles, blocked intervention, and struck key South Korean facilities with hundreds of thousands of special forces, and then combined the First and Second armies to carry out a maneuver to break through the South Korean military's defense zone and capture Busan in three to five days.<sup>14</sup> Some studies argue that such a scenario is aimed at the rapid occupation of Seoul on the premise of the use of nuclear

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<sup>9</sup> Sul-Giye Park. 2023. "Why would North Korea Conduct another Nuclear Test?" *Union of Concerned Scientists*, Apr 6. <https://blog.ucsusa.org/sulgiye-park/why-would-north-korea-conduct-another-nuclear-test/>.

<sup>10</sup> Aljazeera and News agencies. 2024. "North Korea Says it Tested Solid-Fuel Missile with Hypersonic Warhead." *Aljazeera*, Jan 15. [North Korea says it tested solid-fuel missile with hypersonic warhead | Weapons News | Al Jazeera](#)

<sup>11</sup> "North Korea: North Korea Tests 'Most Powerful' Solid-Fuel Missile." 2023. *Asia News Monitor*. <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/north-korea-tests-most-powerful-solid-fuel/docview/2800732448/se-2?accountid=9867>

<sup>12</sup> Jones, Craig. 2021. "The Kill Chain (II): Dynamic Targeting." In *The War Lawyers*. United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, Incorporated.

<sup>13</sup> [Thae Yong-Ho Special] Ep.3 - The Truth about North Korea's Nuclear Program, Full Episode. Directed by Arirang News. 2017. [\[Thae Yong-ho Special\] Ep.3 - The Truth about North Korea's Nuclear Program Full Episode - YouTube](#)

<sup>14</sup> Hui-Rak Park. 2017. "An Analysis on North Korean Nuclear Strategy in Military Use: Application of "Strategy = Ends + Ways + Means" Equation." *National Defense Research* 60 (4): 29-52

missiles.<sup>15</sup> In addition, as mentioned in the introduction, it is a general analysis that the possibility of preemptive use of North Korean nuclear weapons is quite high under the current situation in which Kim Jong-un's speech announced the policy of a preemptive attack on nuclear weapons on September 9, 22.

This nuclear armament, which is highly likely to be pre-emptively operated, is fatal to allow even a single attack due to the extreme destructive power of its own armament, and it is useful to refuse to use nuclear weapons through a pre-emptive strike in terms of self-defense considering the fatalities of nuclear weapons and the level of damage that is intolerable in the event of an attack.<sup>16</sup> President Yoon Seok Yeol conveyed his position at a debate held in February 2022, saying that a preemptive strike against North Korea with a kill chain would deter war and preserve peace. In other words, it means that if there are signs of a nuclear missile, there is no other way except a preemptive kill chain, and it was emphasized that a preemptive strike is not intended to start a war, but to prevent a war.<sup>17</sup> Internationally, a pre-emptive strike is considered acceptable in international law because it "used force to deter or minimize its influence in the event of an imminent attack" and is clearly triggered by imminent danger rather than speculation.<sup>18</sup> Throughout modern history, the United States and other powers have used pre-emptive strikes against enemies. Israel's airstrike on nuclear facilities in Iraq in 1981 and the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 were good examples of a pre-emptive strike.<sup>19</sup> Especially when discussing legitimate wars in the age of nuclear weapons, the deadly destructive power of nuclear weapons requires a fight against time, that is, 'preemptive'.<sup>20</sup> In other words, it is impossible to respond proportionally to the nuclear threat through conventional weapons, and due to the lethal nature of nuclear weapons, the response by conventional weapons can be achieved through the refusal to use preemptive measures. This is why the 'preemptive' kill chain is important, not 'reactive'.

### **Stealth aircraft performance analysis**

In the Gulf War, the first war in which stealth aircrafts were deployed, only 36 F-117s were deployed during 'Operation Desert Storm'. Although this is only 2.5% of the total 1,900 fighters and bombers, it flew more than 1/3 of all bombers and attacked about 40% of strategic targets. During the operation, the F-117 flew more than 1,250 sorties and dropped more than 2,000 tons of bombs during a mission that lasted a total of 6,900 hours. What is noteworthy is that most of the targets were distributed deep in Baghdad, and even though Iraq protected the capital with 3,000 anti-aircraft guns and 60 surface-to-air missile batteries, the assigned mission

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<sup>15</sup> Chang-Hee Park, Ki-Ho Hong, and Tae-Young Kwon. 2017. "ROK's New Military Strategy and Operational Concept for North Korean Nuclear Threats." *Korea Research Institute for Strategy* 189-237.

<sup>16</sup> Hui-Rak Park. 2019. "An Analysis on the Possibility of North Korean Attack Under Nuclear Threat and South Korean Preparations Against the Attack." *National Defense Research* 26 (2): 233-261.

<sup>17</sup> Ji-Hye Shin. 2022. "Yoon Says 'Preemptive Strike' is 'to Protect Peace'." *The Korea Herald*, Feb 3. <https://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20220203000945>.

<sup>18</sup> Chang-Sop Pyon, Suk-Hi Kim, and Min Xu. 2023. "A Preemptive Strike: Will it Resolve the North Korean Nuclear Standoff?" *North Korean Review* 19 (1): 99-111.

<sup>19</sup> Mueller, Karl P., Rand Corporation, (U S. ). Project Air Force, and the United States. Air Force. 2006. *Striking First: Preemptive and Preventive Attack in U.S. National Security Policy*. 1st ed. Vol. MG-403. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation.

<sup>20</sup> Suk-Ho Ki. 2015. "A Study on the Historical Understanding of "Anticipatory Self-Defense" and the Justification of a Preemptive Attack Against the Nuclear Threat of North Korea." *National Defense Research* 96: 395-445.



was accomplished without a single loss.<sup>21</sup> During the Gulf War, to perform a bombing mission with a 4th generation of non-stealth fighters like the F-16, it was necessary to operate support aircraft such as air defense suppression fighters, cover fighters, and aerial refueling tankers. However, the stealth fighter was able to perform this mission alone without support aircraft other than aerial refueling tankers. In this regard, as the Joint Chiefs of Staff of Korea is aware, the concept of stealth fighters being "the core of kill chain forces that do not require support and can effectively penetrate major targets by stealth with minimal power" is a major implication.<sup>22</sup>

In the event of a nuclear threat from North Korea before the war, it is clear that the operation of the kill chain through stealth fighters is an effective alternative. North Korea's nuclear power is the most threatening asymmetrical force that is difficult for South Korea to counter, but South Korea's stealth aircraft, on the other hand, can be said to be an asymmetrical force that can pose the greatest threat to North Korea. The deployment of stealth aircraft enables direct penetration into the target area due to its stealth and intrusiveness, and enables reduced attacks even when a strike against the air defense network is necessary. Of course, the deployment of a stealth aircraft itself cannot mean the complete neutralization of North Korea's mobile launcher, but the existence of a stealth aircraft that can hover over North Korea will itself be a powerful asset in suppressing North Korea's nuclear use button. Since the use of nuclear weapons is a two-faced choice that can threaten the survival of the North Korean regime, the operation of a kill chain using stealth aircraft, which can increase the possibility of failure in the use of nuclear weapons, can be said to have sufficient policy, strategic, and operational significance. Ultimately, the biggest conventional risk factor for North Korea with nuclear weapons can be achieved by operating the preemptive kill chain by maximizing the 'Stealth capability of the F-35', which will be the strongest way for us to respond, except for extended deterrence by the United States.

### **Considerations for a preemptive kill chain operation**

A preemptive attack on nuclear weapons is inevitable, as was previously discussed, but in this case, a limited number of attacks must be carried out. Since a preemptive attack on a nuclear weapon aims to deter the use of nuclear weapons, it is necessary to consider which attack tool is most appropriate to achieve the intended goal and to limit the weaponry used in the attack to the extent that it does not cause any more serious damage than necessary. This intention requires the least possible destruction.<sup>23</sup>

Therefore, the following restrictions are required for the preemptive operation of the kill chain. First, only targets directly related to nuclear threats should be limited to attack targets. Targets for this include nuclear-related facilities such as nuclear weapons themselves and related storage facilities and means of projection such as mobile launchers (TELs). The execution of the kill chain should aim for minimal destruction, and precise strikes using precision-guided

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<sup>21</sup> Peter Suci. 2020. "Why F-117 Airstrikes on Baghdad Were the Ultimate Showcase for Stealth." *The National Interest*, May 21. <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/why-f-117-airstrikes-baghdad-were-ultimate-showcase-stealth-156151>.

<sup>22</sup> Kwan-Haeng Jo, and Hyeon-Ju Jeong. 2014. "Strategic Utilities of Stealth Fighters in Northeast Asian Security Context and their Implications for ROK Air Force." *Defense Policy Research* 30 (4): 91-124.

<sup>23</sup> Suk-Ho Ki. 2015. "A Study on the Historical Understanding of 'Anticipatory Self-Defens' and the Justification of a Preemptive Attack Against the Nuclear Threat of North Korea." *National Defense Research* 96: 395-445.

weapons should be performed on the provocation site where North Korea's nuclear threat is carried out.

Second, the means of attack should be limited to the minimum number of aircraft and missiles to carry out the kill chain. North Korea's proportional quantity of large-scale counterattacks will occur if it attacks using large-scale aircraft and missiles to attack North Korea's nuclear weapons, which will escalate into an all-out war. Therefore, according to the level of activity of the North Korean nuclear threat, an attack with a minimum number of attack means proportionate to it should be carried out. As a result, responding to North Korean nuclear weapons through minimizing attack methods and limited target operations described above is a key consideration in carrying out a preemptive kill chain.<sup>24</sup>

## **CONCLUSION**

Considering North Korea's current security, including six nuclear tests, several ICBM tests, and recently tested solid-fuel missiles, it is analyzed that the current security is quite threatening and is not strange in the event of a war. In addition, we are responding to North Korea's nuclear program with expanded nuclear deterrence through a firm alliance with the great power of the United States, but this is a political and diplomatic response, not a military response, and even this cannot 100% guarantee our safety. Ultimately, as mentioned earlier, considering the current situation, such as the relationship with the United States, North Korea's nuclear capabilities and possibility of using nuclear weapons, and South Korea's military power (possession of stealth aircraft), the most effective and threatening military response we can do is the preemptive kill chain using F-35 stealth aircraft. Of course, in North Korea, where the enemy's air defenses have not been neutralized, the search and destruction of nuclear weapons through the implementation of Kill Chain is risky, and the operation of Kill Chain through conventional weapons will not be a complete solution to the North Korean nuclear threat. However, from North Korea's point of view, the existence of the plan alone has a valid value in that it can increase the likelihood of failure because the use of nuclear weapons must be a determination to extinguish the North Korean regime.

## **RECOMMENDATION**

A lot of strategic, operational, and tactical considerations will be required for these operational plans to take shape and develop into an operational plan. Additionally, to operate the preemptive kill chain using the F-35 system, it is necessary to conduct additional research on the standard determination conditions for the implementation of the kill chain in the event of a nuclear threat from North Korea before the war and how to prevent a war from escalating.

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<sup>24</sup> Jung-Ho Kang. 2023. "A Study on the Preemptive Kill Chain Operation when Detecting North Korean Nuclear Activities Before All-Out War." *Defense Policy Research* 140: 43-83.



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