



SOUTH KOREA'S MILITARY INFERIORITY COMPLEX MUST END

BY JOHN LEE

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According to a [survey](#) by the Korea Institute for National Unification, in November 2020 more South Koreans believed that North Korea had a stronger military than South Korea. That changed for the first time in 2021—by a slim margin. More now believe the South Korean military is more robust than North Korea's (37.1%) than the other way around (36.5%).

Why has it taken so long for the South Korean public to acknowledge the superiority of their own military?

The Trump Effect

Donald Trump's four-year term as president of the United States was [a nerve-racking time](#) for many in South Korea.

He [repeatedly disparaged](#) the free trade agreement between South Korea and the United States, and made [excessive demands](#) in cost-sharing negotiations. Maryland Gov. Larry Hogan said that President Trump had a [personal dislike](#) for South Korea, something he allegedly voiced in front of Hogan's Korea-born wife.

President Trump's approach made many in South Korea wonder if decoupling might be imminent, possibly helping convince many South Koreans that

their country was in a much weaker position than North Korea.

The Appearance of Strength

The Republic of Korea Army is [one of the largest standing armies](#) in the world, and its size is the backbone of its defense against North Korea.

However, many South Koreans fulfill their mandatory military service [because it is compulsory](#) rather than out of a sense of patriotic duty. Also, because today's South Korea is [a much wealthier country](#) than in the 1960s and 1970s, there is a belief that the South Korean Army has grown [soft and effete](#).

By contrast, the sight of thousands of goose-stepping and battle-ready North Korean soldiers and the procession of their latest missiles during their infamous military parades is impressive to behold.

Plus, while South Korea and the United States have frequently conducted [extensive and highly publicized joint military exercises](#), North Korea has long had an ace up its sleeve. Since 2006, North Korea has conducted [six nuclear weapon tests](#), and undertaken numerous and varied missile tests. Neither South Korea nor the United States appear to have any path to denuclearizing North Korea.

A Reality Check

Yet the North Korean military is not as formidable as it appears. Their weakness was apparent in 2017 when a North Korean soldier [defected to the South](#) across the DMZ. After he was shot by his former comrades during his escape, the doctor responsible for saving the soldier's life reported that he had found inside the soldier's body [parasites](#) he had only previously read about in medical textbooks.

Food security between the two Koreas is so stark there is even [a notable height difference](#) between South and North Koreans—North Korean soldiers are so malnourished that many have become physically stunted.

The South Korean military is also a much more modern fighting force. The South Korean Army boasts weapons such as [K2 main battle tanks](#) and [K9 howitzers](#)—many of which the South Korean government has [exported](#) to other countries—and has [Apache attack helicopters](#).

In 2019, the South Korean Air Force bought [40 F-35 stealth fighters](#), and in 2020, it announced that it would [buy 40 more](#). Earlier this year, South Korea showed the world the prototype of its own indigenous 4.5 generation fighter jet, the [KF-21 Boramae](#).

Not to be outdone, the South Korean Navy has [three Sejong the Great-class Aegis destroyers](#) and plans to [buy three more](#). Recently, the South Korean Navy announced plans to enter into service its [first aircraft carrier](#) by 2033.

Meanwhile, North Korea's tank forces are [obsolete and impotent](#) in the face of South Korean K2 Black Panther tanks, its geriatric air force [belongs in a museum](#), and its navy is hopelessly [outgunned](#) and [outhulled](#). Aside from its [fleet of submarines](#), none of North Korea's conventional forces could ever hope to challenge South Korea's Armed Forces.

Doomsday Weapons

North Korean strategists are aware of South Korea's military prowess and industrial output, which is why they have no intention of relinquishing their nuclear weapons.

Yet, having nuclear weapons is very different from using them. The moment one of their nuclear bombs detonates in South Korea, that would guarantee a vengeful retaliation from the full might of the South Korean and the United States militaries.

Even if the US didn't come to South Korea's defense, South Korea has its own [arsenal of missiles](#). While South Korea does not possess nuclear weapons, its mix of ballistic and cruise missiles are an integral part of its aptly-named [Kill Chain and Korea Massive Punishment and Retaliation plans](#). Not only are [South Korea's missiles](#) already capable of targeting every inch of the Korean Peninsula, but the Hyunmoo-4,

[tested](#) just last year, [reportedly](#) carry a payload as large as 2 tons to ranges of up to 800 kilometers. Once it is completed, it is [rumored](#) that the Hyunmoo-4 will have a 3,000-kilometer range and be capable of supersonic flight.

After South Korea and the United States mutually [agreed to lift the former's missile restrictions](#) and allow Seoul to [develop solid-fuel space rockets](#), these agreements have ensured that North Korea no longer has a monopoly on offensive missile technology and capability. South Korea also [recently successfully tested](#) a locally developed submarine-launched ballistic missile.

To ensure its second-strike capability in the event of a war, South Korea also has anti-missile defense systems—[Patriot missiles](#) and [THAAD](#). In addition, South Korea is also developing its domestic anti-missile defense, the [L-SAM](#), and plans to build its own [version of the Iron Dome](#) to counter North Korea's artillery.

Perception Matters

Many believe that the North Korean military is full of hungry soldiers with nothing to lose. They also assume that the South Korean military includes pampered soldiers who grew up in an affluent society. They reason that the typical North Korean soldier is more willing to fight and win.

Yet, in November 2010, after North Korea opened fire and [shelled Yeonpyeong-do](#), South Korean marines fired back [within 13 minutes](#). One of the two South Korean marines who died that day, [Staff Sergeant Seo Jeong-woo](#), was on leave but returned to base after the attack. There are also signs, including attention-grabbing [defections](#), that the dedication of North Korean conscripts is not nearly as strong as its state media would have the outside world believe.

The erroneous view that South Korea's military and soldiers are somehow weaker or less capable than North Korea's serves Pyongyang's goals at the expense of Seoul and Washington's national interests.

Korea [ranked 10th](#) worldwide in terms of nominal gross domestic product in 2020. As such, South Korea would have much to lose should the Korean War ever reignite. Combined with the perceived South Korean weakness vis-a-vis North Korea, South Korea's political leaders and voters enter into negotiations with North Korea from a disadvantaged position.

South Koreans need to understand that their country is superior and that this superiority extends to the military. While triumphalism would not aid South Korea in dealing with North Korea, neither does an inferiority complex.

The South Korean government must address this problem. [Tiptoeing around North Korea's pride](#) and [placating North Korean demands](#) must end. The way for that to change is for the South Korean government to change its own narrative, making clear all the advantages their country—and their military—enjoys.

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