



WHY CHANGING ROK DEMOGRAPHICS DISADVANTAGE NORTH KOREA

BY JAMES JB PARK

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The Oct. 7, 2023 Hamas attack on Israel was surprising in many aspects. The paramotors, despite their slow speed, served as a wake-up call for countries dealing with potential border infiltration issues. The graphic videos depicting hostages being abducted across the breached “smart fence” were certainly horrifying, particularly for the Republic of Korea: The Israeli fence is modeled after Korea’s, with its cutting-edge sensors and CCTV situated in the DMZ.

Yet, despite subsequent [heated debates](#) in ROK National Assembly hearings, it seems ROK is safe for now, for several reasons. These include distinct operational environments and recently upgraded defense and radar systems. The geographical difference between the flat southern regions of Israel and the mountainous DMZ, which is laden with countless landmines and air-defense guns, makes a direct comparison unfeasible. Also, the ROK does not experience a daily influx of DPRK workers crossing the border, unlike how some working-visa holding Palestinians turned into belligerents on Oct. 7. Lastly, the ROK’s indigenous TPS-880K multifunctional radar, recently fielded by LIG (a LG subsidiary), can detect very small drones and paramotors within a 9-mile range and a little more than a mile in altitude. The radar can instantly issue C4 (command, control, comms, and computer) orders to varying types of air-defense guns, as well as the low-altitude [combined anti-aircraft weapon](#)

([Bi-ho Hybrid](#)) and ROK sentries, serving as the linchpin of the integration of the ROK’s DMZ weaponry. While human error is always possible, as evidenced by a DPRK drone infiltrating Seoul last year, the integrated, automated defense system appears quite sufficient in addressing systematic invasions.

However, the conversation about border security has sparked further debates over the ROK military’s plan to partially revoke the Sept. 19 Comprehensive Military Agreement (CMA). To foster inter-Korean reconciliation, the 2018 CMA established [“No Fly Zones” around the DMZ](#), essentially halting aerial intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) activities by the ROK-US alliance. The CMA’s raison d’être, aimed at decreasing inter-border clashes, has lost its justification due to recent shifts in global security concerns, wherein previously unthinkable military moves, like Russia’s illegal invasion of Ukraine and subsequent drone warfare, have become the new norm. This has necessitated the alliance reconsidering and [revoking](#) the clause prohibiting the DMZ ISR activities. Unfortunately, North Korea’s launching of its [first reconnaissance satellite](#), condemned by the international community due to its use of illegal ballistic missile technology that threatens the [“global nonproliferation regime,”](#) has resulted in a game of brinkmanship, leading to the complete abandonment of the CMA on Nov. 23.

In this volatile security landscape, the rapidly changing demographics of the ROK represent a wake-up call for both the ROK and DPRK. With [roughly 1.32 million](#) foreign residents in the GSMA within 50km (30 miles) of the DMZ, an unprecedented challenge has emerged for both Koreas. The involvement of numerous countries as prime stakeholders protecting the lives of their citizens transforms potential incidents involving hostages, or casualties in the greater Seoul area, from a purely inter-Korean issue to an international crisis. For the DPRK, the existence of diverse stakeholders offers strategic advantages, buying time and creating extra room to maneuver. The recent Hamas attack and international hostage abductions resulted in extremely complex multilateral negotiations involving the [US, Israel, Hamas, Qatar, and Egypt](#). An established international entity, preferably a security-related one, would have facilitated the negotiation much more easily, but the lack thereof stalled subsequent hostage-release deals.

Interestingly, this changing landscape is not actually disadvantageous for the ROK. In fact, while the

Yoon administration's attempt to re-vitalize the UNC must have been planned long before the Hamas attack, its plan to galvanize the long quiescent United Nations Command (UNC) has gathered international attention. The UNC, much like NATO, functions not only as a collective defense mechanism, but also to protect the increasing number of foreign nationals in Korea. No longer a pure battle command, the UNC has managed inter-border military and civilian issues over the last several decades under the 1953 Armistice. However, on Nov. 14, the ministerial-level conference in Seoul—with all 17 UN Sending States, or countries that contributed combat troops or supporting personnel in the 1950 Korean War—[reaffirmed](#) the spirit of the 1953 Armistice and pledged that they would repel any future attack on the ROK. The revitalization of the UNC appears an attractive countermeasure in the event of international-scale hostage abductions or casualties due to DPRK attacks. The UNC, a coherent entity with military and government representatives from all seven continents, can facilitate international negotiations as the sole conduit to prevent inter-agency and inter-country complications and confusions, drawing on its time-tested experience in dealing with the civilian populations.

Of course, some might argue that subtle and sensitive negotiations are not always suited for the military. They might also contend that foreign service officers (FSOs) and personnel specializing in hostage negotiations would be more appropriate. However, such claims themselves further justify the revitalization of the UNC regarding ramping up its manpower and inviting the presence of FSOs and other experts. This approach addresses legitimate concerns about the need for diplomatic and negotiation expertise within the UNC, ensuring a comprehensive and well-rounded approach to addressing complex international challenges.

The ROK, traditionally a very homogenous nation, is embracing rapid immigration and the presence of foreign laborers due to its [birth-rate crisis](#). Next year alone, a record number of [approximately 160,000](#) new, legal foreign laborers will arrive, taking up positions at small local farms and factories, some of which are located within 30 miles from the DMZ. With the presence of foreign nationals, including those represented by the UN Sending States and the UNC, any DPRK move that jeopardizes their safety would prompt the Yoon administration to reinforce the UNC with support from relevant member states. Such a scenario goes against the DPRK's best interests. Despite the traditional DPRK rhetoric to

dismantle the UNC (given the UNC's position outside of the [UN's direct purview](#)), the current security circumstances do not favor any reckless actions from the DPRK. The changing demographic landscape and the increased international presence in Korea make it imperative for the DPRK to tread cautiously.

PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed and encouraged.