



Implications of the Swords of Iron War on South Korea

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The surprise military attack by Hamas on Israel on October 7, 2023, and the war that began after this attack, should lead policymakers in South Korea to reconsider their defense policy toward North Korea – particularly border defense and defense against missile and drone attacks.

The attack by Hamas and Islamic Jihad attack on Israel on October 7, 2023, raises many questions about the failure of Israeli deterrence, intelligence, and surveillance to prevent the attack or halt it once it began. These questions are not only relevant to Israel. They apply to many countries that share borders with rival states.

One such country is South Korea, which has begun to discuss the possible implications of the Israel-Hamas conflict on its defense policy toward North Korea. The involvement of North Korea in assisting Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and Iran; the way the attack unfolded; and the progress of the ensuing war are forcing Seoul to reevaluate its North Korean policy and border security policy.

The attack from above and below ground - The border between North and South Korea (the DMZ) is 240 km, which is longer than the 60 km Israel-Gaza border. In both cases, there are tunnels underneath the borders. Israel built an anti-tunnel

barrier with sensors along the border with Gaza to prevent attacks through the tunnels constructed by Hamas. The October 7 attack was conducted above ground, but the battle in Gaza is on the ground and in the tunnels. In the case of the Koreas, only a few tunnels have been found under the DMZ, though it is estimated that several more exist but have yet to be detected. These tunnels would allow North Korea to attack the South both at ground level and underneath the DMZ. The use of tunnels by Hamas and Hezbollah against Israel will force Seoul to update its warfare strategy and learn from the Israeli experience.

Failure of intelligence and technological apparatus – The prevention of war and effective defense of the Israel-Gaza and North-South Korea long borders depend on deterrence, intelligence, and technological apparatus that provide alerts of incoming attack. In the Gaza case, IDF intelligence failed to properly interpret indications that an attack was going to occur. Hamas knows the IDF monitors its communications, so it limited the number of people who knew the exact date of the attack. Hamas blocked Israel's vision along the border by destroying the cameras that were deployed along the border. Their decision to create many holes in the fence along the 60 km border and invade Israel simultaneously through those holes made it difficult for the IDF to block the attack.

These events were a wake-up call for South Korea, which does not post soldiers on every inch of its 240 km border. Its defense policy for the border with North Korea is based on cameras and other surveillance apparatus in addition to the soldiers who are deployed along the border. An attack on the surveillance apparatus along the DMZ, as happened in Gaza, would limit Seoul's ability to defend the border. Seoul should consider adding other surveillance apparatus that would limit Pyongyang's ability to blind them.

Anti-missile systems – The war in Gaza, as in other war zones, demonstrates the vulnerability of military, strategic, and civilian targets to missiles, artillery, and drones. Missile defense systems limit casualties and improve an army's ability to operate, and also allow policymakers greater room for maneuver during hostilities. If the number of civilian casualties were to increase dramatically, those policymakers would have to change their war plan. Israel's Iron Dome system intercepts most of the missiles that target the civilian population and military and strategic sites. Israel was also able to intercept some drones from Gaza, Lebanon,

and Yemen, and for the first time managed to intercept middle-range missiles with the Arrow anti-missile system. North Korea has short-range missiles, artillery, and drones that can attack South Korea. Seoul should improve its missile defense system to intercept those threats.

Reserve forces – The war in Gaza and the Russia-Ukraine war demonstrate the importance of military reserve forces. South Korea should improve the operational readiness of its reserve forces in case North Korea decides to initiate an attack.

North Korea does not have any incentive to start a war with South Korea now. The continuation of the Russia-Ukraine war has huge financial and technological benefits for Pyongyang, and the war between Israel and Gaza has economic benefits as well. Pyongyang can offer its weapons to other states and terrorist organizations. The attack by Hamas on Israel on October 7 has indirectly allowed North Korea to increase its threat to the South, and the South should take steps to meet that threat.

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