The Republic of Korea (ROK) and the United States military members stationed on the Korean Peninsula have a saying; ‘Kap-chi Kapshida’ or ‘We Go Together’. United States Soldiers, Airmen, Marines and Seamen have been stationed in Korea for over half a century and the requirement has never been greater for a strong alliance. The Korean Peninsula is of strategic importance for the United States. With tensions rising on the peninsula, the continued strength of the Republic of Korea and the United States is paramount to the mission of the Combined Forces Command and U.S. Pacific Command (PACOM). The ROK-U.S. alliance is strong and the forces on the Korean Peninsula are ready to “Fight Tonight,” even though the main mission of the United Nations Command is to maintain the armistice. The basis for maintaining the armistice comes in the form of deterrence. ROK-U.S. deterrence of North Korean provocation is the cornerstone of the strategic framework for the alliance.

The Department of Defense defines deterrence as: the prevention of action by the existence of a credible threat of unacceptable counteraction and/or belief that the cost of action outweighs the perceived benefits (JP 3-0). Rapid Force Projection and Rapid Response are two methods of deterrence on the Korean Peninsula as well as the use of a strategic message. Together these three capabilities provide the framework for deterrence in the region. Successful, enduring deterrence is predicated on two factors. First is maintaining a high degree of military readiness. The second is communicating that readiness level throughout the region. In this example Rapid Force Projection and Rapid Response provide the tangible military readiness while the strategic message of deterrence is the medium for communicating to allies and adversaries.

The first capability inside the deterrence framework is Rapid Force Projection. This is the ability of the ROK-U.S. alliance to quickly project forces to the peninsula in order to deter North Korean provocation and reinforce the armistice. As seen in Cobra Gold 2014, and other PACOM multi and bi-lateral training events, the alliance can exercise their readiness to support deterrence by rapidly changing postures with the employment of airborne forces and aerial delivery of combat power. A specific example occurred during the month of September, 2017, when the U.S. Army conducted a live-fire exercise using High Mobility Artillery Rocket System flown to the Korean Peninsula by C-17 aircraft from the continental U.S. The ability to rapidly posture forces is a key deterrent tool for the alliance that reinforces the Republic of Korea’s faith in their U.S. partners resolve to support them with additional assets to deter North Korean provocation.

However, Rapid Power Projection is not the only critical capability. The second capability is Rapid Response: the ability to rapidly respond to North Korean provocation. It is crucial to the maintenance of the armistice that the ROK-U.S. alliance can quickly react to dissuade provocation. The ability of the alliance to respond efficiently with precision deep strike capability is imperative to...
effective deterrence as a response option. On July 5, 2017, military personnel from the U.S. Army and Republic of Korea conducted a combined precision deep strike show of force following the North Korea intercontinental ballistic missile test. Utilizing the ROK Hyunmu-II Missile and the Army Tactical Missile System (ATACMS), alliance forces fired into the territorial waters off the East Coast of South Korea. The intent was to reaffirm the ability of the ROK-U.S. alliance to rapidly respond with deep strike capability anywhere, anytime, and anywhere. In addition to land-based Ballistic Missile Defense (BMD) systems, the U.S. Navy has BMD capable ships in the region. The ROK maintains three destroyers called KDX-III (Korean Destroyer eXperimental), with radar system comparable to the version used by U.S. Navy ships. Alliance discussion of ROK purchasing Standard Missile-3 interceptor missiles from the U.S. contributes to the outward message of deterrence. This would provide ROK destroyers to engage ballistic missiles and contribute to the ballistic missile defense of the peninsula. However, the commitment on the Korean Peninsula to Rapid Response and its effects on deterrence goes farther than deep strike capabilities.

The recent deployment of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense system to the peninsula highlights the importance of deterrence through readiness and the capability to respond rapidly. The system provides a layered missile defense capability capable of ballistic missile intercept and destruction from projectiles inside or outside the atmosphere. Recognizing the importance of Rapid Response capabilities to successfully deterring provocation, the ROK recently began ballistic missile defense modernization. When completed, ROK Patriot ballistic missile defense forces will have the increased range and greater lethality against theater ballistic missiles. Additionally, this modernization works in conjunction with layered system approach of the overall Rapid Response framework. This layered approach enhances the battle space for ballistic missile defense and provides another deterrence capability. These capabilities alone do not accomplish the desired endstate. But must work in conjunction with a greater strategic message in order to be effective. The message is simple and resounding: “the alliance can strike anywhere, anytime, and anywhere without hesitation.” This strategic message not only informs our allies in the international community of the alliance’s stance but when working in conjunction with deliberate actions based on the capabilities of Rapid Force Projection and Rapid Response, they may influence the North Korean decision cycle.

Deterrence and its framework capabilities are inherently combined. As the ROK Army modernizes it reaffirms the strategic message of “anywhere, anytime and
anyplace without hesitation.” The ROKA has recently developed the Korean Smart Top-Attack Munition which is a fire and forget, top attack anti-tank munition with an effective operating range of 2-8 km. This extended range and ballistic trajectory allow the vehicle to remain concealed behind cover while firing successive rounds toward the known locations of enemy to provide effective indirect fire support against targets hidden behind obstacles and structures. The ROKA has a robust artillery capability made up from a mix of some older and more modern systems. They have most recently upgraded with self-propelled 155 mm K9, much like the US M109A6 Paladin which can displace and fire quickly and possess increased range and accuracy. The ROK and U.S. alliance’s commitment to deterrence can take many forms but function best when used in tandem.

These efforts, equipment and messages directly increase the Combined Forces Command’s ability to influence the Korean Peninsula to deter aggression. The integration and synchronization of combined and joint Fires assets further enhances the Combined Forces Command’s ability to rapidly project power and rapidly responds to North Korean provocation. Tangible displays of commitment to that cause working in tandem with a consistent, strategic message allow the alliance to speak to the international community, and most importantly North Korea. Modernizing equipment and transparency of goals reinforce this narrative. What this amounts to is a simple lesson; in order to deter North Korea aggression layers of capabilities, messages and actions are necessary.

Only when taken in totality can the scope of the ROK-U.S. alliances efforts to deter North Korean aggression be appreciated. Rapid Force Projection from sea, land and air reinforce the strategic message that: “the alliance can strike anywhere, anytime, and anyplace without hesitation.” Rapid Response capabilities define the methods of engagement and strengthen the messages further. With the notion of anywhere, anytime and anyplace already understood, all changes to capabilities must be viewed through that lens. This echoes the commitment to deterrence by the alliance and provides context for allies and adversaries. The ROK-U.S. alliance is truly combined and ready to “Fight Tonight.” Together the three fingers of Rapid Force Projection, Rapid Response and Strategic Messaging form a resolute fist that not only deters North Korea provocation but informs the international community of the unyielding will of the ROK-U.S. alliance. Deterrence shapes actions on the Korean Peninsula and provides the framework for the ROK-U.S. alliance to influence the Korean Peninsula.