The Asan Institute for Policy Studies

Op-ed

Middle East Drone War Looms on Korean Peninsula

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Iran’s recent retaliatory strikes have highlighted the new realities of modern warfare. The figures alone are staggering: Iran launched over 2,000 drones and more than 1,000 ballistic missiles at the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait, and other targets. The tactic of overwhelming defenses with cheap drones first, followed by missile strikes—a "mixed firing" approach—is transforming the battlefield. This is not a distant concern. In December 2022, when multiple North Korean drones crossed the Military Demarcation Line and penetrated Seoul’s airspace, South Korea scrambled helicopters and fighter jets but failed to shoot them down. The mere fact that inexpensive, small drones could violate the capital’s airspace confirms vulnerabilities in our air defense systems.

Drones, once auxiliary reconnaissance tools, have now become core strike assets. In the Russia-Ukraine war, drones worth tens of millions of Korean won have repeatedly destroyed tanks costing billions of Korean won. Amid these changes, nations worldwide are rapidly expanding their drone capabilities. Even the U.S. has deployed the Lucas drone, a reverse-engineered copy of Iranian-made loitering munitions. Despite their low cost, drones deliver significant strategic impact and have already become a cornerstone of modern warfare. South Korea cannot delay bolstering its drone capabilities any further.

The urgent priority is establishing a counter-drone defense system. Relying on expensive intercept missiles to neutralize cheap drones is unsustainable—it disadvantages the defender. The recent drone attacks in the Middle East exemplify this "cost-effective" attritional warfare. North Korea, too, will closely analyze the economic efficiency of drones. For a regime lagging far behind South Korea in economic power, drones offer a weapon that maximizes impact with minimal investment. Since 2014, North Korea has repeatedly infiltrated drones, and recently, new loitering munitions resembling those used in the Middle East have been detected. If North Korea combines drones with long-range

artillery and missiles in a "mixed firing" tactic, South Korea's existing missile-centric air defense system will face immense strain.

Therefore, South Korea must supplement its missile defense systems with low-cost, high-efficiency counter-drone measures. Drawing from innovations like Israel's laser interception system "Iron Beam," a multi-layered anti-drone defense network is essential. Simultaneously, offensive drone capabilities must be aggressively developed. Swarm drones and long-range loitering munitions, which enable mass simultaneous operations, are becoming game-changers in future warfare.

However, South Korea's current capabilities remain insufficient. The military is reported to operate approximately 1,200 drones—far fewer than the U.S.'s 12,000 or China's 5,000. Moreover, most are reconnaissance-focused. The number of attack drones, particularly loitering munitions critical in modern warfare, is known to be extremely limited. Against this backdrop, recent discussions about disbanding the Drone Operations Command must be carefully reconsidered. While organizational efficiency is important, weakening a dedicated body overseeing drone capabilities at this pivotal moment is unwise.

Warfare has always been reshaped by technological innovation: machine guns altered tactics, tanks and aircraft transformed conflict. Today's game-changer is the drone. The drone war has already begun. South Korea must urgently build counter-drone defenses, drastically expand offensive drone capabilities, and establish a cohesive strategy and organization to sustain these efforts. An unprepared military cannot survive the next war.

* The view expressed herein was published on March 16 in The Chosun Daily and does not necessarily reflect the views of The Asan Institute for Policy Studies.