South Korean marines conducting amphibious assault Tok Sok Ri Beach.

55th Signal Company (Patrick Gainey)

The Republic of Korea Approaches the Future

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The Republic of Korea (ROK) has embarked on a journey that could transform its military in the next ten to twenty years. As a key U.S. ally, its force structure, along with underlying assumptions and doctrine, will have great impact on alliance maintenance, interoperability, and operations. If Washington desires a long-term coalition relationship with Seoul, especially in a post-unification timeframe, knowing the direction of the development of Korean forces can enable a considered decision on whether and to what degree it should be part of the process. This article discusses where Korea is taking its military.

The Ministry of National Defense (MND) initiated an institutionalized reform by creating the National Defense Reform Committee (NDRC) in April 1998. The committee reports directly to the defense minister and has a five-year charter (1998–2003) covering nearly every aspect of the defense establishment and structure from barracks culture to strategic concepts, from acquisition to force structure.

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AP/Wide World Photo (Ahn Young-Joon)

South Korean soldiers patrolling DMZ.

The Revolution in Military Affairs Planning Group (RMAPG) followed in April 1999 and was subordinated to NDRC to create a central authority to oversee near-, mid-, and long-term reform. The group was formed under a three-year charter to extend the work of NDRC by taking a long-range outlook on measures needed for the force of 2025—significantly seen as a post-unification setting.

Putting Pieces Together

Defense reform is part of a larger program to reform the government and society, covering every sector from administration and education to economics and finance. The election of long-time opposition leader Kim Dae-jung as President during the financial crisis of 1997–98 forced Koreans to examine their system. A nationwide restructuring binge followed. Two rounds of cuts reduced civil service ranks by 22,000 in the summers of 1998 and 1999. The government itself was reorganized. Prominent changes were creation of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade from two separate ministries and combining the former Ministry of Finance with various independent agencies to form the Ministry of Finance and Economy. Large conglomerates and banks were allowed to fail; Japanese popular culture, long forbidden, was allowed; and the new *sunshine policy* opened unprecedented intercourse with North Korea. The economic recovery, although troubled by the American economic downturn and rising energy costs, was often cited as a leading model for Asian renewal.

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Interestingly, Seoul has undertaken a deliberate effort that addresses the Clausewitzian paradoxical or remarkable trinity of forces that characterize conflict:

- "blind natural force" or irrational force of "primordial violence, hatred, and enmity" expressed through the people
- "play of chance and probability" in the conduct and outcome of a conflict wherein "the creative spirit is free to roam" and thus is leveraged and moderated by the actions of the army and its commanders
- the role of reason, operating through politics and the government, that subordinates the military as an instrument of policy.

This theoretical foundation informs Clausewitz's entire view of how conflict should be analyzed and waged. He asserts that a balance among the three tendencies is necessary to win wars. Korea's efforts can be viewed as an integrated thrust to reform the operating actors of the Clausewitzian trinity—the people, army, and government—to bring balance and set the conditions for successful outcomes. The forces and actors exist in constant tension. Korean reforms, addressing all three, can be seen as a deliberate effort to reconcile these natural stresses and could result in a more coherent, strong, and prosperous nation.

The need for military reform was also driven by a perceived need to emphasize quality over quantity. This shift was driven by several factors. First were the budget realities in the wake of the financial crisis. The increase in the operations and maintenance portion of the budget (versus force improvement) was also troubling.

Second, as Korea's political landscape changed from a three-decade pseudodictatorship under former generals Park Chung Hee, Chun Doo Hwan, and Roh Tae Woo to a civilian government in 1993 with the election of Kim Young

U.S. Army (Giselle C. Knight)

ROK military police at Yongsan.

Sam, the military became depoliticized and decisively accountable to civilian authority and democratic process. Domestic demands from the people and the younger progressive officer ranks sent an unmistakable message that the military had to be more efficient. It also had to become a professional force that was an instrument of national security and not national rule.

Third, an increasing number of senior military officials understood the changing external realities that included not only political pressure for reform but the changing nature of conflict, force structure, and the way wars would be waged. The revolution in military affairs (RMA) threatened to leave Korea behind, which defense officials saw as unacceptable. Defense Minister Cho Sung-tae wrote, "Our preparation for future warfare, especially RMA, is not a matter of choice, but a must."[1]

Fourth, threat perception had already begun a shift from a simple orientation on the North and communism to subregional, regional, and global events, especially to security concerns arising from China, Japan, and Russia. There was also a sense that the American position in the region faced an uncertain future owing to the reemergence of Chinese power. More fundamentally, Seoul began to consider a post-unification scenario where the main rationale for its current defense strategy would disappear.

Finally, Korea desires a bigger international role. Its eager participation in the East Timor peacekeeping effort is only the latest in a series of international crisis response actions dating back to the deployment of 50,000 troops to Vietnam. Indeed, Seoul has yearned for more prestige and power on the regional and international stage since the mid-1960s. Its leading involvement in the Asia Pacific Economic Forum, Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Regional Forum, ASEAN plus Three dialogue, Four-Party Talks, Asia-Europe Meeting, and most recently the renewed proposal for a Northeast Asia security dialogue are rooted in Park Chung Hee's leadership in the formation of Asian Pacific Council in 1966.

Toward Self-Reliance

Korea's long-term defense posture is not set out in a single document but can be deduced from the reform programs discussed here and

weapon systems acquisition plans that have been made public. For long-term vision, this article will adopt the RMAPG-chartered endpoint of 2025. What is the defense concept for that date?

Seoul will have a self-reliant posture. This is a continuation of Park Chung Hee's *Chaju Kukpang* (self-reliant national defense) program and philosophy of the 1960s and 1970s and reflects a deeply rooted desire to be free from foreign influence or indebtedness. This same sentiment informs the North's ideology of *Chuche*, another term for self-reliance.

The standing force will be small, lean, volunteer-manned, professional, high-tech, and lethal. Efficient and transparent management will ensure the biggest bang for the *won*. The force will provide regional deterrence against those who would contemplate aggression. It will also possess the capability for regional power projection. The analog conjured by these features is not unlike the capability and posture of Israel. The motto for reform is *small but strong*. The operative terms are efficiency, transparency, and professionalism. The five-year NDRC charter has the following goals:

the effort to digitize the military extended throughout the echelons and ranks

- establish the basis for building a strong and elite military
- build a force of professionals with pride and a strong sense of duty
- increase efficiency through management reforms and defense digitization
- win trust as an armed force of the people.[2]

NDRC was organized with enough political capital to make an impact. Headed by a retired four-star general with superb qualifications, the committee was established directly under the Minister of Defense. Four functional subcommittees, each headed by a two-star, illustrate the wide scope of the charter: military structure, defense improvement, personnel, and defense management. A high-powered review group vetted the effort.

Early on, the committee established a detailed program consisting of 58 specific reform projects. This number expanded as NDRC identified additional tasks and through the work of RMAPG. The President approved these initial reforms in June 1998, and reform actions were earnestly put into effect. The first major reorganization was undertaken at the ministry itself in January 1999 and included the joint chiefs of staff (JCS) and the service headquarters and involved several key features.

Establishment of the Defense Acquisition Office (DAO). The new office consolidated all aspects of the defense acquisition system previously fragmented across MND and JCS. More significant was the consolidation and simplification of the acquisition process. DAO and the acquisition system underwent additional reorganizations in 1999 and 2000.

Establishment of a digitization bureaucracy and program. In the same January 1999 reorganization, the defense vice minister was appointed the defense chief information officer (CIO) while JCS formed a major new staff section—the Central Directorate for Command and Communications—to oversee command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (C^4ISR) issues. Each service headquarters similarly designated its respective vice chief as service CIO and established a new staff section, an assistant chief of staff for command and communications or its equivalent, to oversee service-specific C^4ISR. The effort to digitize the military and make its members information savvy extended throughout the echelons and ranks. A paperless document-handling system was established in MND while thousands of computer classrooms were placed in units down to company level to train all personnel. A grand plan for an integrated defense C^4I system and a supporting digitized communications network were drawn up envisioning a three-stage process ending in 2015 and making the ROK military one of the ten most digitally advanced in the world. The system and network would achieve unity of defense C^4I and advanced digital communications. The challenges are daunting. However, Korea's state of information technology know-how, the level of public computer familiarization, and the ongoing effort to build a civilian national high speed digital network suggest that the vision is achievable.

Korean RMA

A number of units and agencies were consolidated over the remainder of 1999 and into early 2000, including Defense Transportation Command, which gathered transportation assets from all services and assumed responsibility for all operational and strategic transportation planning; Army Aviation Operations Command, which consolidated attack and assault helicopter assets previously parceled out to armies, corps, and divisions (it also possesses an organic air assault infantry brigade, giving it the capability for limited independent ground operations); Nuclear, Biological, and Chemical (NBC) Defense Command to centralize operational NBC defense assets; and the Korea National Defense University combining three independent schools.

AP/Wide World Photo

South Korean tanks crossing Hantan River.

A controversial plan to reorganize how the army would resist a North Korean attack was suspended. The proposal would have replaced First and Third Armies, the two front-line army level commands, with Army Operations Command, thereby eliminating an army level headquarters. Second Army in the rear area would be replaced by Rear Area Command, reflecting a more comprehensive mission for rear area security and national mobilization. Creation of Army Operations Command was meant to mirror the fighting organization already adopted by the air force and navy while reducing senior officer billets. It would also address several organizational and staffing issues on the Combined Forces Command level. Nevertheless, opposition based on politics, budgetary constraints, and operational imperatives escalated and an action scheduled for December 1999 remained suspended.

The work of NDRC put into motion short-term reforms to establish the conditions for long-term development, but the formation of RMAPG in April 1999 signaled an earnest effort to truly transform the defense establishment. The group's three-year charter stipulated that the first year be focused on defining the environment, conditions, concepts, and specific reform and transformation measures. This process included an analysis of the security environment in twenty to thirty years, the direction of national development, and an appropriate security strategy. An important assumption was that unification of the peninsula will take place within 25 years. Another task was defining the conceptual foundation of a Korean RMA and how it would operate.

The final first year effort was to recommend actions to implement the desired changes. The second year would be spent developing action plans to implement the recommendations. The last year, 2001, would be devoted to institutionalizing the changes by updating policies and plans.

The group's work the first year was hectic and extended beyond the 12-month deadline. While the actual products and recommendations of the annual stages have not been made public, a remarkable budget-related document was released in August 1999 and updated in September 2000 that, combined with press coverage and the 1999 and 2000 defense white papers, provide a glimpse of the vision for the Korean RMA.

U.S. Navy (Evelyn P. Haywood)

Korean supply ship *Ro Bong* at Diego Garcia.

Seoul deduced lessons from three recent conflicts that bear on the nature of war and the force necessary to wage it. The Persian Gulf conflict showed that quality is more important than quantity. The dominance of American systems such as stealth, Aegis, Apache, Tomahawk, and the global positioning system taught Koreans that the side with the more advanced weapons holds the initiative. The use of integrated C^4I systems based on networked computers was also seen as key to the allied victory. Moreover, Korea learned the criticality of timely logistic support.

Second was the Kosovo crisis, seen as a strategic victory brought by long-range precision munitions. It reinforced the lesson of the Gulf War, that advanced weaponry will continue to dominate the modern battlefield. More specifically, Korea saw the utility and dominance of satellite navigation, a fiber-optic communication network, and laser guided precision warheads. It saw the rise of Internet warfare and learned that striking targets from afar minimizes civilian casualties.

Finally, Korea drew lessons from its own Battle of Yangpyong, the naval clash off the west coast in June 1999. Despite the danger of drawing broad conclusions from limited engagements, this clash vindicated the enormous investment in the military since the 1970s. The victory went to the side with the more modern equipment manned by highly and realistically trained crews with high morale. This lesson has been used to argue that funds be allocated now for long-term force development.

The combined lessons for future warfare boil down to three principles. First, conflicts will not be large-scale total wars, but limited or local conflicts with specific objectives. Second, quality over quantity and the decisive potential of asymmetric superiority will be big factors. Included in this principle is recognition of the combat power derived from high-tech and digitization in precision sensors, high-speed direct communication nets, and robotics as well as the multiplying effect of an integrated sensor-C^4I-precision-guided munitions system. Finally, as the future battlefield will not have a front line and thus no forward or rear areas, battles will be dispersed. These observations apply not so much to a war with North Korea as to a threat beyond the peninsula.

Keeping Up with the Neighbors

The immediate danger remains the North, but MND expects a gradual decline of the Pyongyang threat as unification progresses. At the same time it envisions other concerns such as the capabilities and intentions of China, Japan, and Russia. The ministry believes that those countries are developing their military capabilities to increase their influence over regional events. Especially worrisome is Japan's acquisition of high-tech weapon systems such as reconnaissance satellites, AWACS, Aegis, theater missile defense, the F–2, large transport ships, submarines, and aerial refueling—the very systems MND believes Korea needs. Seoul cannot match Beijing, Tokyo, and Moscow, but it desires adequate strength to deter them.

The ministry perceives two key weaknesses with regard to the North—continued dependence on the United States for deterrence and insufficient modernization due to budget limitations. In comparison to its neighbors, it sees the following shortfalls:

- inadequate intelligence collection, production, and dissemination systems as well as electronic warfare capability
- C^4I-reconnaissance-surveillance shortcomings such as lack of ability to detect and differentiate deep/long-range targets
- inadequate precision targeting and strategic weaponry, especially the lack of medium- and long-range guided munitions, the short operating radius of fighter aircraft, and lack of open-sea and underwater capabilities
- insufficient air and missile defense, measures to block satellite operations, defense against biological and chemical threats, and civil defense
- technological gaps in microelectronics, robotics, unmanned aerial vehicles, sensors, lasers, and satellites.[3]

An urgent requirement is thus implementing an objective-oriented force improvement plan to provide an independent capability to

AP/Wide World Photo (Ahn Young-Joon)

South Korean soldiers in Hwarang exercise.

deter North Korea and an adequate national defense, defined as that level of force that will convince an enemy that it stands to lose more than it will gain by attacking.

The military of 2015 will be small but strong and capable of guaranteeing national survival in a changing security situation involving powerful neighbors. It will be an elite, high-tech, and digitized standing force possessing advanced capabilities and will be economically run with rational and efficient management procedures.

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A five-stage evolution is envisioned during unification, an eventuality seen as a given. A portion of the force, 400,000–500,000, will constitute the elite standing force, considered indispensable even in the post-unification environment. The balance may be reduced as unification proceeds. The first stage is the current force of 690,000, which will be maintained. The second is when North and South agree to coexist, probably in some form of confederation. A reduction on the order of 100,000 is expected at that juncture. Upon unification the force will grow much larger due to the need to absorb much of the North Korean military until it can be transitioned into civilian life. As the situation settles, this force will be reduced and finalize at the 400,000–500,000 level when the transition ends. Any future reduction will be tempered by the economic and employment situation. Today there is strong consensus that a significant reduction of the military cannot be implemented because, aside from threat perception, the civilian job market cannot absorb individuals who would not be drafted.

Four principles will guide the transformation in the next 25 years. First is improved defense capability, further defined as the gradual enhancement of the force based on technology to meet the needs of the future battlefield. An essential component is to develop a near-term capability to deter North Korea without assistance and to invest intensively in research and development to raise indigenous technologies to parity with other advanced nations. The next is the grand plan to establish a defense digital communication network, supported by satellites, that is tied to the

Decontaminating Korean F–5Es, Ulchi Focus Lens.

Agence France Presse

national high speed network. This foundation will support a digitized and integrated defense C4I network for warfighting and an integrated, automated management network to support logistics, mobilization, training, planning, and personnel management. The third is to professionalize the force. There is wide consensus that the army should be reduced while the air force and navy are enlarged, in line with a high-tech force focused more on air and naval assets. Army to air force/navy manpower ratios ranging between 50:50 and 70:30 have been considered, in contrast with the present ratio of 80:20. The proportion of officers and NCOs will be increased to reflect the needs of a smaller, more professional force. Measures will be taken to improve the quality of life for personnel, especially careerists, to retain those who have received advanced and expensive training. The final principle is the rationalization of defense management systems and processes. Accountability, responsibility, expertise, and efficiency will be targeted. Logistics and acquisition will take advantage of cost-saving, off-the-shelf alternatives from the civilian sector.

The proposed future standing military will be based not on a specific threat, but on potential regional threats, with China and Japan heading the list. The capabilities foreseen are, broadly speaking, those with a regional reach such as surveillance, targeting, and power projection—especially increased naval and air force capabilities. Whether the changes will result in a revolution in military affairs on the peninsula is debatable. Still, significant transformations in structure, process, and capabilities are in the offing that will have a significant interoperability impact for coalition operations between Korean and other national forces. The United States has a critical interest in understanding how the long-term goals of Korea as well as its short-term decisions to further them will affect both the day-to-day operation of the alliance and its continued strength. Our partner's force development deserves close attention. **JFQ**

NOTES

[1] Cho Sung-tae, "Korea's Defense Vision for 21st Century," *Korea Herald*, December 13, 1999.

[2] Republic of Korea, *Defense White Paper 2000* (Seoul: Ministry of National Defense, 2000), pp. 203–04.

[3] Ministry of National Defense, *Korean Defense Budget for the Future* (Seoul: Ministry of National Defense, 2000), p. 28.