

MH-53J PaveLow II  
at Taegu Air Base.

# South Korea's Defense Posture

U.S. Air Force (Mike Reinhardt)

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From a South Korean perspective, while the overall security environment improved with the demise of the Soviet empire, there is now greater uncertainty and a growing number of threats with which to contend. Mismanagement and improper handling of emerging issues and lingering problems will be detrimental to South Korean security as well as to stability and peace throughout Northeast Asia. Within this environment, there are two compelling necessities: first, to maintain a strong security alliance between the Republic of Korea (ROK) and the United States, and second, to augment the ROK military on the peninsula and across Northeast Asia. This article examines the uncertainty and threats that face South Korea, the ROK-U.S. alliance, and South Korean defense requirements.

## Uncertainty and Threats

Among South Korean security concerns, the foremost threat is presented by North Korea's aggressive intentions and large military establishment. While it has signed important accords with Seoul—the Basic Agreement, the Joint Declaration of Denuclearization, and the Provisions—North Korea has failed to implement the terms. Rather it is committed to communizing the entire Korean peninsula by use of force. For Pyongyang unification calls for integrating the divided territory as well as consolidating *juche* ideology and its ways. The North cannot afford to give up this ultimate goal because it has legitimized the regime and persuaded its people to unite and to make sacrifices. Toward this goal North Korea has adopted a strategy of five besieging offensives: political peace, ideological, external/diplomatic, espionage, and, finally, military.<sup>1</sup> But history has proven the first

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four to be unattainable. The North is left with the military offensive in which it has an advantage over the South. In a word, North Korea's aggressive intent can be backed only by military means.

Even with a faltering economy, North Korea has made every effort to modernize its forces and to maintain a military edge over the South.<sup>2</sup> Not only are the North's forces highly mobile and mechanized; approximately 65 percent are near the demilitarized zone (DMZ) and on a high state of readiness. These strengths would permit the North to launch a *blitzkrieg* against the South without reinforcement, redeployment, or massive mobilization. It is believed that North Korea plans either to sweep the entire peninsula before American reinforcements arrive or to partly occupy the Seoul metropolitan area in the early stages of a war. In both cases South Korea, with its capital located only 40 kilometers from the DMZ, would suffer severely.

Arms control may be the most suitable way to reduce military tension along the DMZ. But arms control talks are unlikely to yield success. Though initiatives have been proposed some 280 times since the Korean War, most of them are unrealistic and have served

mainly as propaganda. In fact, in the Basic Agreement and the Provisions, the North agreed to introduce some declaratory arms control measures and to negotiate further. But it has failed to do so. Moreover, it has been trying to weaken the ROK-U.S. combined defense posture by demanding the withdrawal of U.S. Forces Korea (USFK) as a precondition for talks. Thus, North Korea is not committed to creating a stable military situation on the peninsula. Rather it tries to retain a militarily favorable condition for achieving forceful unification. One can therefore expect the military threat to continue.

The North's conventional military threat has been heightened by its possible possession of weapons of mass destruction.

While it is uncertain whether North Korea has nuclear weapons, it definitely has the capability to produce them.<sup>3</sup> Strategically, a nuclear-armed North could prevent the United States from using nuclear weapons by holding South Korea and parts of Japan hostage. Pyongyang could thus undermine extended deterrence and confound escalation control in a conflict between the two Koreas.<sup>4</sup> In other words, by complicating strategic responses and weakening the credibility of deterrence vis-à-vis the South, a nuclear-armed North could gain an active deterrent against the United States while launching a conventional attack. Thus, under any circumstance, North Korea cannot be allowed to acquire such weapons or retain a clandestine nuclear capability.

The focus on nuclear issues has tended to overshadow other weapons of mass destruction, that is, chemical, biological, and toxin weapons. While one should not underestimate the strategic value of biological and toxin weapons, chemical weapons are of particular concern. Although party to the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention, Pyongyang eschewed the Chemical Weapons Convention. Perhaps this is because it has developed a reliable chemical weapons capability. It is believed that the North has stockpiled 1,000 tons of such weaponry and can produce 4,500 tons of chemicals annually. It has various chemical agents, including sarin, tabun, phosgene, adamsite, mustard gas, and blood agents (such as hydrogen cyanide).<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, it has delivery means which include artillery pieces, multiple-launch rocket systems, mortars, and missiles. Rodong and Taepo Dong-2 missiles could threaten South Korea, Japan, and the United States by making most major East Asian cities vulnerable to attack.<sup>6</sup>

In addition to these capabilities, there are sober operational reasons for being alarmed about chemical weapons. Unlike biological and toxin weapons, chemical weapons can yield immediate military effects by softening positions prior to assault, sealing off rear-echelon reserves, blocking lines of retreat, and neutralizing artillery.<sup>7</sup> These effects fit into North Korean offensive doctrine. Even the threat of chemical weapons is a force multiplier because it makes opponents use special protective

### North Korea is not committed to creating a stable military situation on the peninsula

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equipment which reduces combat effectiveness.<sup>8</sup> Together with conventional superiority North Korea's weapons of mass destruction and a diehard intent to unify the peninsula by force present an ominous threat that will likely remain the most serious security concern for Seoul in the foreseeable future.

Another, related uncertainty that confronts South Korea stems from the instability of North Korea. While Kim Il Sung was alive the regime was regarded as being stable. His death last year has led to an artificially imposed stability. His son and apparent successor, Kim Jong Il, does not have the charisma to consolidate power, but he may attempt to legitimize his rule through economic reform. However, history reveals that such revision is likely to undermine the regime's stability. This is Kim Jong Il's dilemma. The real danger is that the leadership of North Korea will mobilize the populace to slow the breakdown of the regime. Even if the North does not wage a "scapegoat war" against the South, any sudden collapse of its government for economic and political reasons would be detrimental to South Korean security. How should we handle the inevitable chaos and

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upheaval in North Korea? Should we help restore order? Or should we facilitate the collapse of the regime? What kind of military preparedness and actions will be needed to manage a transitional period before peaceful unification? We should think now about ways to cope with such a collapse.

The third and last South Korean security concern is the arms buildup in neighboring states. In spite of a regional relaxation of superpower tensions, or perhaps because of it, the countries of Northeast Asia are spending more on defense and have announced force improvements, especially in naval and air capabilities. China has significantly beefed up its air force in recent years and is on a shopping spree for advanced aircraft. The publicized purchase of 72 Su-27 Flanker fighters from Russia will enhance the power projection capability of the People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF). Despite the defensive role of the original design, the Su-27 can be converted to a multi-role combat/attack version. Its combat radius of 1,500 kilometers

and fuel capacity of more than 4,000 kilometers would greatly enhance air cover. PLAAF has also acquired an airborne refueling system, and some A-5s and F-8s are allegedly equipped with such kits. This in-flight capability will substantially increase China's operational flexibility and allow for "positioning the launch site farther from the source of a potential counterstrike."<sup>9</sup>

The virtual dissipation of a land force requirement on the Sino-Russian border has allowed China to divert resources to secure its maritime interests. In 1992 the navy added several classes of ships to the fleet. Its continuing efforts to acquire an aircraft carrier are known. With Russian naval versions of the Su-27 Flanker or the MiG-29 Fulcrum fighter, a carrier would significantly augment China's power projection capability and upset the naval balance in Asia.

China's shopping spree for advanced weapons has caused Taiwan to launch its own arms buildup. Taipei is not likely to lag behind Beijing's military growth and modernization program.<sup>10</sup> Sino-Taiwanese rearmament, left unchecked, could touch off a spiraling arms buildup throughout Northeast Asia. A resurgent Taiwan could arouse China to embark on a more intensified weapons procurement binge with help from Russia and Ukraine. In turn, this could goad the Japanese into an arms race. Tokyo is becoming wary of Beijing's increasing military power and the dangers of competition between the two countries. Accordingly, Japan is likely to match the Chinese buildup. Due to the size and maturity of its economy, Japan has formidable purchasing power and the ability to develop a threatening arsenal at relatively short notice.<sup>11</sup>

Such buildups and modernization in the region may not pose an immediate threat to South Korea, but they are likely to increase instability as well as the South's defense burden in the long run. Furthermore, this trend will confuse ROK strategic calculations and predictions by presenting an ever-shifting balance of power. In sum, South Korea faces North Korea's aggressive military, uncertainty about the stability of the Pyongyang regime, and a regional arms race. None of these security issues can be effectively managed by the

South alone and require close cooperation with the United States.

#### The ROK-U.S. Security Alliance

The alliance between South Korea and the United States, which began with the ROK-U.S. Mutual Defense Treaty of 1953, has been the backbone of South Korean defense. It has provided a secure environment for the South's economic miracle and democratization and contributed greatly to peace and stability in Northeast Asia by deterring communist expansion. The ROK-U.S. security arrangement has changed with the environment. It started with a patron-client relationship and evolved into a genuine alliance with the establishment of the ROK-U.S. Combined Forces Command (CFC) in 1978. With the birth of CFC, the alliance entered a partnership like no other, departing from the notion that it was merely a by-product of the Korean War. South Korea, based on its sustained economic development and defense modernization, took on more responsibility for its defense during the 1980s, efforts that helped consolidate the Korean-U.S. security partnership.

With the end of the Cold War, many debate the nature of the security order that should take its place. We must recognize, however, that despite the diminished status of the old international order, a new order has not yet settled on Northeast Asia. While the threat of global communist expansion is virtually gone, the threat from the North lingers on the Korean peninsula. This means that the rationale of the traditional ROK-U.S. security alliance is still valid. The compact needs to look to its long-term structure and purpose—to a time when the military threat from the North is insignificant—while grounded in the near- to mid-term requirement to maintain a credible deterrent. This transformation should not be driven by a time constraint but by a realistic assessment of the situation. In the meantime, both countries should identify common security interests and present a clear security vision, which could contribute to peace and stability in Northeast Asia as well as to the prosperity of both countries.

In this regard, mutual security interests can be identified as: preventing the emergence of a regional hegemon, maintaining

the leading American role in managing regional security, deterring North Korean aggression, providing the United States a forward base, and maintaining free trade and markets by protecting strategic resources and sea lines of communication (SLOCs). Based on common interests, we can divide responsibilities and design a framework for security cooperation.

So long as the South-North confrontation continues, U.S. forces can provide a balance on the peninsula, compensating for the insufficiency of ROK forces. If peaceful coexistence between the North and South takes root, the Korean-U.S. security arrangement can be adjusted. When the North Korean threat is gone, for instance, the alliance should be refocused from a peninsular to a regional perspective. South Korea would then assume the lead in crises on the peninsula while the United States would take the lead in regional and global crises with its partner playing a supporting role. This implies that South Korea and the United States should continue to nurture the alliance through mutually supporting security cooperation, and also gradually transforming the relationship from cost-sharing to responsibility-sharing. To maintain this kind of alliance, Seoul should strive for a more balanced force. Such a structure will enable the South to assume a greater regional role and ease the American burden.

On the American side, it is essential to maintain a reliable and clear naval and air presence in the region, despite inevitable troop reductions. The U.S. presence has not only stayed a spiraling arms race but has prevented other regional actors from developing military capabilities. Of course, the United States can reduce forces on the peninsula after unification or a substantial reduction in tension, while it maintains the force level of U.S. Forces Japan (USFJ). If we take into account the size of USFJ, we may doubt whether the United States can fulfill the role of security guarantor in East Asia. Thus, even after unification, it would be desirable for the United States to retain substantial forces in South Korea as a signal of its long-term resolve.

The Republic of Korea and the United States should expand their partnership beyond the military sphere to tackle other challenges. Such a comprehensive security

## The Two Koreas

	North Korea	South Korea
<b>Total Armed Forces</b>	1,128,000	633,000
<b>Land Forces</b>		
Tanks	3,700	1,900
Armored Personnel Carriers	2,500	2,000
Artillery	2,300	3,500
Self-Propelled Artillery	4,500	900
Multiple-Launch Rocket Systems	2,280	140
Surface-to-Surface Missiles	84	12
Surface-to-Air Missiles	10,000	1,020
Helicopters	340	622
<b>Air Forces</b>		
Combat Aircraft	770	447
<b>Naval Forces</b>		
Submarines	25	5
Destroyers	0	8
Frigates	3	32
Patrol Craft	390	122
Amphibious Craft	231	14

Source: The International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance 1994–1995* (London: Brassey's for The International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1994.)

relationship would include the political, economic, social, and environmental as well as military dimensions of security. Then we should clearly identify how our alliance of free market democracies serves those dimensions. For example, we can enhance our mutual competitiveness by expanded technological cooperation. Moreover, we can work together to secure resources and safeguard SLOCs. In sum, a comprehensive ROK–U.S. security alliance could better serve the interests of both countries well beyond the Korean peninsula. Finally, we should focus on the linkage in the Korean-U.S. alliance and a multilateral security order in Northeast Asia. Most agree on the desirability of a subregional mechanism. The main problems in creating such an organ could be overcome by using our present bilateral alliance as the basis for a multilateral arrangement and making them mutually reinforcing.

The current ROK–U.S. security alliance should be retained and its framework strengthened until the North Korean threat decreases or disappears. In the meantime, we should think about the modification of our traditional alliance to cope with a changing security environment. It should be transformed into a region-wide compact based on

shared responsibility that is comprehensive and driven by profit and common interests, not a threat. The speed of this structural transformation will depend on trends in the security environment on the peninsula and in Northeast Asia. Policy changes that might affect ROK–U.S. security relations should be made in a gradual manner while the combined deterrent capability of the two countries is maintained.

## ROK Defense Requirements

Under that framework South Korea would have to assume greater responsibilities which would require augmenting its overall defense capability. But given the force level outlined in the Bottom-Up Review to cope with two major regional conflicts simultaneously, as few as four Army divisions, eight Air Force wings, and three aircraft carriers would be sent to the peninsula if war broke out there. That would represent a force level far below that required to repel North Korea.<sup>12</sup> In order to compensate for a deficient force level, ease the U.S. burden, maintain a reliable combined defense posture, and assume a greater responsibility on the peninsula and in Northeast Asia, South Korea must maximize the integrated combat capabilities of its armed forces through a balanced improvement of each service and functional area. Considering the North's *blitzkrieg* planning and the destructive power of its modern weapons, priority must be given to improving technologically-advanced assets like early-warning and battlefield surveillance, air-ground-sea mobile warfare, and precision weaponry.

ROK land forces should focus on improving mobility and fire support with lighter forces and a streamlined organizational structure.<sup>13</sup> To prepare for offensive mobile war the army should reorganize corps, infantry divisions, and brigades into mechanized forces. Reserve forces should also be organized into infantry divisions and supplied with firepower and equipment to strengthen unit capability and reduce manpower. To establish a balanced force structure, however, switching from the predominantly army-based defense posture against massive land attack to one that would secure

national air defenses and maritime interests, South Korea must invest more in naval and air capabilities than in the past.

Naval improvement must be focused on securing a qualitative superiority to counterbalance the North's numerical edge and changes in the security environment. The ROK navy should have a balanced, three-dimensional combat capability comprising surface, underwater, and aviation. To prevent North Korean submarines from cutting off SLOCs, the navy especially needs submarines, helicopters, and surface patrol planes (P-3Cs). In addition, there should be more exercises held by the ROK and U.S. navies designed to supplement the multinational Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC) exercise conducted biennially since 1971 under U.S. Pacific Fleet Command.

With regard to airpower, it is imperative to secure assets that can meet the requirements of future warfare and that are appropriate to the geography of the Korean peninsula. Currently, the ROK government is proceeding with the Korean Fighter Program (KFP) to secure next-generation combat aircraft. This program includes the gradual introduction of 120 F-16s.<sup>14</sup> But the air force also needs an enhanced electronic warfare capability to increase the survivability of tactical aircraft and to counter electronic warfare as well as strengthened defense of core Korean and U.S. combat facilities. Finally, South Korea should enhance its C<sup>3</sup>I system to augment the interoperability of combined forces and link its land and air forces. The fact that peacetime operational control passed to South Korea at the end of 1994 makes this even more important. Washington should encourage Seoul to acquire C<sup>3</sup> technologies.

In the meantime, we should also focus on training to operate these systems and structures. The formation of CFC in 1978 enhanced combined operations by enabling South Koreans and Americans to work together. Through Exercise Team Spirit both countries have been provided with valuable opportunities to conduct a combined mission at peninsula-level. We should expand combined exercises to the regional level to cope with the new security environment. Depending on the nature of potential crises, we should think about forming combined

rapid deployment forces. Such a balanced force structure would enable South Korea to take responsibility for countering a low-intensity North Korean provocation and to provide greater support to the United States in the region. This would strengthen our alliance in the long term, making it a true partnership. JFQ

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Republic of Korea, Ministry of National Defense, *Defense White Paper 1993-1994* (Seoul: Ministry of National Defense, 1994).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 55.

<sup>3</sup> There is a controversy over whether North Korea has a nuclear capability. But most South Koreans think that they have at least the wherewithal to produce some nuclear weapons. Some people also believe they have already made a crude nuclear device.

<sup>4</sup> Young-Koo Cha, "Security Threat Perceptions: A Korean View," a paper presented at a workshop on "Real Threat Perceptions in Asian States" cosponsored by the East-West Center, the Center for Naval Analyses, and the Research Institute for Peace and Security in Honolulu on August 24-25, 1992, p. 4.

<sup>5</sup> Joseph S. Bermudez, Jr., "North Korea's Chemical and Biological Warfare Arsenal," *Jane's Intelligence Review(Asia)* (May 1993), p. 228.

<sup>6</sup> "Ballistic Missile Development in the DPRK," in *Proceedings of RINSA International Symposium '94 on Capabilities and Prospect of Special Weapon System of North Korean Military*, September 1, 1994, pp. 26-31.

<sup>7</sup> Michael Sheehan, "North Korea's Chemical, Biological and Toxin Warfare Capabilities: Implications and Options," in *Proceedings of RINSA International Symposium '94*, September 1, 1994, p. 70.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 87.

<sup>9</sup> James G. Roche, "Tactical Aircraft, Ballistic and Cruise Missile Proliferation in the Developing World," a paper presented at the conference on the Project on Advanced Weaponry in the Developing World sponsored by the American Association for the Advancement of Science in Washington on June 11-14, 1992, p. 12.

<sup>10</sup> Young-Koo Cha and Kang Choi, "Land-Based Confidence-Building Measures in Northeast Asia: A South Korean Perspective," a paper presented at a conference on Northeast Asian Cooperation Dialogue cosponsored by the Institute for Global Conflict and Cooperation and the National Institute for Research Advancement in Tokyo on May 16-17, 1994, p. 16.

<sup>11</sup> Buzen and Segal, "Rethinking East Asian Security," pp. 9-10.

<sup>12</sup> Heritage Foundation, "The Folly of Clinton's Defense Plans for Korea," *Backgrounder*, no. 228 (Washington: The Heritage Foundation, June 28, 1994), p. 2.

<sup>13</sup> *Defense White Paper 1993-1994*, pp. 100-02.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 104-06.

South Korea should enhance C<sup>3</sup>I to augment combined forces