

The Right Steps to ROK Defense Reform: How to Overcome Constraints

Bruce Klingner
Senior Research Fellow
The Heritage Foundation

Abstract

Shaken by North Korea's two deadly attacks in 2010, the Lee Myung-bak Administration recalibrated ongoing defense reform plans to enable South Korea's military to protect the country more effectively. President Lee's Defense Reform 307 plan sought to redress many of South Korea's security shortcomings, but Seoul remained hampered by demographic and fiscal constraints. Indeed, questions remained as to whether the government would fully fund South Korea's defense needs, defense budget shortfalls having delayed previous reform efforts. However, South Korea does not bear its security burden alone and its alliance with the United States will continue to play an irreplaceable role in maintaining peace and stability throughout East Asia. Washington should therefore continue to ensure South Korea's security through robust U.S. military deployments in the Pacifica and with an extended deterrence guarantee. While North Korean threats will remain the paramount focus of the U.S.–South Korean alliance, neither country should lose sight of the benefits of Seoul's "going global" with its political, economic, and military capabilities.

Keywords: Defense Reform 2020; Defense Reform 307; U.S.-ROK relations; U.S.-ROK alliance; ROK military; US Forces Korea; Combined Forces Command; Lee Myung-bak; Cheonan; Yeonpyeong-do

Introduction

From a full-scale invasion by the million-man North Korean army to tactical-level clashes along the inter-Korean border, South Korea continues to face a daunting spectrum of security threats from North Korea. Even North Korea's weaknesses pose a challenge to Seoul, as regime collapse would trigger instability, massive refugee flows, humanitarian disaster, Chinese incursion into North Korea, loss of

control of nuclear weapons, and civil war.

For decades, Seoul has countered these threats by developing a military capable of deterring, defending against, and defeating the North Korean menace. These precautions may no longer be sufficient, however, as South Korea must now respond to growing regional as well as global instability. For example, Seoul is increasingly concerned about Chinese military modernization and the belligerence of the People's Republic of China (PRC) throughout East Asia.

In response to these new challenges, as well as several domestic concerns, South Korea has initiated a series of defense reforms—even as Seoul prepares to assume the additional responsibility of wartime operational control (OPCON) in 2015¹—to enable its military to protect the country more effectively while expanding its security reach beyond the Korean Peninsula. These reforms are commendable and will redress many of South Korea's security shortcomings.

Regrettably, Seoul will be hampered in these efforts by demographic and fiscal constraints. Indeed, questions remain as to whether the government will fully fund South Korea's defense needs; defense budget shortfalls have, after all, delayed previous reform efforts. In May 2012, the South Korean National Assembly refused to approve the defense reform legislation, preferring to defer the issue until after the December 2012 presidential election.

However, South Korea does not bear its security burden alone, and its alliance with the United States will continue to play an irreplaceable role in maintaining peace and stability throughout East Asia. Despite its security reform initiatives, South Korea will remain heavily reliant on U.S. military capabilities. Washington should, therefore, support Seoul's defense reform initiatives while continuing to ensure South Korea's security through U.S. military deployments and an extended deterrence guarantee.²

Seoul's Initial Defense Reform: DRP 2020

In 2005, South Korea initiated Defense Reform Plan 2020 (DRP 2020), a comprehensive defense reform strategy. The goal of this strategy was clear: to transform the South Korean military into a smaller but more capable force. Overall South Korean military manpower would be reduced approximately 25 percent from 681,000 to 500,000. The army would face the largest cuts, disbanding four corps and 23 divisions and cutting troops from 560,000 in 2004 to 370,000 in 2020.

Seoul planned to compensate for decreased troop levels by procuring advanced fighter and surveillance aircraft, naval platforms, and ground combat vehicles. DRP 2020 called for “replacing nearly every outdated major weapon” and “transition[ing] to a more professional force with a smaller fraction of draftees.”³

The Ministry of Defense characterized this approach as a response to the changing strategic environment and evolving technological requirements. However, South Korea’s demographic woes also helped to drive the DRP. From 1977 to 2002, South Korea “had more than 400,000 young men turn draft age almost every year. But in 2009, only about 325,000 young men turned draft age, and by 2023 that number will be less than 250,000.” President Roh Moo-hyun compounded the demographic problem by lowering the conscription period from 26 months to 18 months, further reducing both the number of available conscripts and the experience level of soldiers.⁴

The 2005 defense reform was also influenced by ideological concerns, such as President Roh’s desire to create a less militarized South Korean society. Reducing both conscript levels and the length of military service was politically beneficial for Roh: It placated the youth vote and provided South Korea’s civilian economy with a much needed increase in manpower. However, it left the military with a lack of experienced soldiers.

This decision was also consistent with Roh’s more benevolent North Korean threat assessment and his vision for transforming Seoul’s relationship with both Pyongyang and Washington. Specifically, Roh believed that he could improve relations with North Korea by both continuing to provide unconditional largesse to Pyongyang and by reducing South Korea’s military. He presumed that North Korea would follow suit by reducing its own military and moderating its aggressive behavior. Instead, Pyongyang maintained its conventional military forces and augmented its asymmetric force capabilities.

President Roh advocated a South Korea that was capable of operating with greater independence from the United States—a position Roh characterized as a means of restoring South Korean sovereignty. Roh’s DRP 2020 did not consider South Korean military requirements resulting from attaining wartime OPCON since the bilateral decision to do so was not made until 2006.

2009 Revisions in Defense Reform Plan

In June 2009, the Ministry of Defense revised DRP 2020 to address growing defense budget shortfalls as well as to accommodate input from the new Lee Myung-bak administration. The most notable changes included:

- Delaying the DRP 2020 endpoint to 2025;
- Reducing the planned defense budget increase; and,
- Adjusting the planned 2020 troop level to 517,000 (compared to the DRP 2020 goal of 500,000, down from the 2004 level of 655,000 troops).

The 2009 defense budget also placed a greater emphasis on improving South Korea's independent capabilities against North Korean nuclear and missile attacks. For instance, the revised defense plan would create the Network Centric Warfare system to enhance real-time command, control, communications, computer, intelligence, reconnaissance, and surveillance (C4ISR) and long-range, precision-strike attack capabilities.⁵

South Korea had lacked sufficient "advanced aircraft, munitions, and advanced capabilities to strike targets in North Korea with precision. South Korea has relied on U.S. capabilities to do much of that for many years, but now it is the time for Korea to have that kind of capability on its own."⁶

Budget Shortfalls Undercut Defense Reform.

DRP 2020 was premised on the supposition that South Korea could compensate for a reduction in its military forces with improved technological systems. Yet, from the very beginning of the plan, the government failed to devote sufficient resources to developing these new systems—a predictable development, given South Korea's economic struggles at the time.

DRP 2020 required a cumulative 15-year budget of 621 trillion won (approximately \$505 billion) and presumed a 9.9 percent annual military budget increase for 2006 through 2010. By 2009, the DRP 2020 plan already had a 22 trillion won shortfall, causing the Ministry of Defense to admit that South Korea was unable "even [to] achieve the initial goals in the defense reform."⁷

The Ministry of Strategy and Finance's 2010 military budget revision increased the 15-year shortfall to 42 trillion won. If planned defense budget shortfalls had continued, the gap would have been 110 trillion won, almost four times the 2009 Ministry of Defense budget.⁸ As a result, the 2009 plan called for cutting military forces by 180,000 troops before the acquisition of modern programs could offset the reduction in forces—a development that increased South Korea's military risk and vulnerability. Indeed, neither the original nor revised DRP 2020 included sufficient measures to meet South Korean requirements for assuming wartime OPCON, including necessary command structure changes.⁹

Revising the Direction of Defense Reform: DR 307

On March 8, 2011, South Korean Defense Minister Kim Kwan-jin announced 73 short-, mid-, and long-term military reform objectives of the new DR 307 plan to be implemented from 2011 to 2030.¹⁰ The plan derived its name from the date—March 7, or 3/07—on which it was approved by President Lee Myung-bak.¹¹ Kim stated that the plan's main priorities were “strengthening cohesion of the armed forces, obtaining active deterrence capabilities, and beefing up efficiency.” He commented that ROK forces had become bulky and inefficient during the previous 20 years, degrading their ability to respond to North Korean provocations.

Catalysts for Change

Some observers have perceived DR 307 as a replacement for DRP 2020. Others, however, view the plan solely as a response to North Korea's military attacks in 2010.¹² Neither characterization is entirely correct. The military attacks were a catalyst for an extensive review of existing defense reform plans. DR 307 is a product of that review—a modification superimposed atop DRP 2020—rather than a new program.

Even before Pyongyang's attack on the *Cheonan* and on Yeonpyeong Island, President Lee had considered making changes to address deficiencies in the existing plan—most notably the underfunded defense budget. North Korean aggression was not the sole reason DR 307 was created. Preparations for regaining wartime OPCON, as well as demographic factors limiting the pool of future conscripts continued to influence South Korean defense reform.

In the aftermath of the 2010 attacks, South Korean public opinion shifted against Pyongyang; the populace came to feel directly threatened by its neighbor to the north. As a U.S. defense official commented, “the *Cheonan* attack changed how South Koreans thought of themselves; the attack on Yeonpyeong changed how South Koreans thought of North Korea.”¹³ This societal shift led to a realignment of security priorities and a commensurate increase in support for ensuring sufficient military capabilities—though not necessarily support for dramatically increasing defense expenditures.

In addition to altering South Korean public opinion toward North Korea, Pyongyang’s two unprovoked acts of war sparked a shift in South Korean defense planning. Seoul interpreted the attack on the *Cheonan* as an indication of Pyongyang’s growing asymmetric warfare capabilities; the artillery shelling of Yeonpyeong Island underscored the fact that North Korea’s conventional forces could not be ignored.

Deficiencies in the ROK military’s response to North Korean attacks demonstrated the need to expand and accelerate ongoing efforts to improve South Korean joint operational capabilities. The Presidential Commission for the Advancement of National Defense recommended that a single commander have authority over all military services’ combat assets. Prior to the *Cheonan* attack, the Ministry of National Defense had limited its plans for improving military joint operational capabilities to changes in the procurement system, not operational reforms.¹⁴

After the attacks, South Korea shifted the main priority of its defense planning. Rather than preparing for a large-scale invasion and total war, Seoul focused on flexible, customized responses to localized military attacks. For example, defense planners placed greater emphasis on the role of the navy and air force in retaliating against North Korean infiltrations and tactical provocations, particularly in the West Sea.

This shift marked a reversal from earlier assessments that predicted North Korea’s conventional force threat would decrease, allowing Seoul to prioritize its navy and air force for missions away from the Korean Peninsula. Following the *Cheonan* attack, Chief of Naval Operations Admiral Kim Sung-chan redirected the navy’s focus away from a decade-long emphasis on blue-water operations toward increased readiness against North Korean attacks.

The navy increased procurement for anti-submarine warfare, including minesweepers, anti-submarine helicopters, and sensor

systems.¹⁵ To emphasize this shift, the naval chief of staff even banned the use of “blue-water navy” and “cutting-edge maritime force” as descriptors for the Navy’s missions.¹⁶

While DRP 2020 was focused primarily on future North Korean threats, the two attacks in 2010 prompted the Lee administration to redirect defense reforms toward near-term security initiatives. Although DR 307 has mid- and long-term elements, Seoul will now be focused on enhancing military readiness against imminent North Korean asymmetric threats. Defense Minister Kim explained that the aim of DR 307 was to “proactively deter current threats posed by the enemy rather than cope with potential threats in the future.” Kim added that with DR307, “it will take one or two days for our military to destroy North Korea’s long-range artillery pieces, from the current one week.”¹⁷

Parameters of DR 307

The Ministry of Defense announced that DR 307 contained several changes in the Korean military command structure, unit structure, troop structure, and force structure. Specifically, DR 307 called for:

- **Command structure reform.** This reform creates an efficient military command system to take the initiative in war planning, preparing for theater operations after wartime OPCON transition, and establishing a new combined defense system for South Korean–U.S. combined operations.
- **Unit structure reform.** This reform reduces the number of units and streamlines the mid-tier command elements by augmenting combat capabilities of combat troop organizations.
- **Troop structure reform.** This reform shifts the military command toward a technology-intensive structure supported mainly by officers and NCOs—an attempt to address the current dearth of skilled soldiers.
- **Force structure reform.** This reform prepares the South Korean army to confront current and future North Korean threats by reinforcing jointness of forces and procuring necessary war capabilities.¹⁸

Improving Military Service Jointness

DR 307 improves interoperability and combat effectiveness of South Korea's armed forces by restructuring the top military command structure and better integrating the different service branches. The South Korean Joint Chiefs of Staff have been strengthened so that the chairman will now command all operations during war and peacetime following wartime OPCON transition.

The Chairman, JCS, will function as the theater operational commander with limited administrative authority (personnel, logistics, training) over the military services. The Chairman will have two subordinate vice chairmen—a four-star officer supporting operational command and a three-star officer overseeing operational support.

Rather than concentrating only on administrative tasks, the service chiefs will be put into the operational chain of command under the chairman, JCS. The operations commands of the Army, Navy, and Air Force will be merged, and each of the three armed services will command the unified operations units. These changes will transform the Joint Chiefs of Staff into an inter-service operational command. During wartime, the Chairman, JCS, will lead army and naval forces, while the commander of U.S. 7th Air Force will remain the air component commander.

In 2015, Seoul will streamline its ground forces by combining the 1st and 3rd field armies into a Ground Operations Command while leaving the 2nd Operations Command (formerly 2nd ROK Army) as is. DR 307 also mandates enhancing early warning and real-time battlefield surveillance and reconnaissance capabilities, both on the Korean Peninsula and in the surrounding areas.

To fulfill this mandate, South Korea will need to boost its network-centric warfare capabilities by establishing a command, control, communications, computer and intelligence C4I system and a battlefield network in order to secure its capacity for integrated combat.¹⁹

Defending Against North Korean Incursions

To boost defenses of the northwest border islands, Seoul will augment military forces and sensors in the area, increase alliance naval and combined-arms exercises in the West Sea, and establish a joint command headquarters.²⁰ DR 307 reverses DRP 2020's planned reduction of 4,000 Marines and instead augments the Korean Marine Corps by 2,000 to 4,000 additional Marines. Seoul will address long-

standing logistical shortcomings by purchasing 40 more helicopters for the Marine Corps as well as additional amphibious ships and light-armored vehicles. Furthermore, in addition to accelerating the procurement of high-altitude spy drones, South Korea will secure advanced counter-battery radar systems and precision-guided munitions capable of attacking North Korean artillery systems.

The new Northwest Islands Defense Command will be a division-sized unit initially commanded by Marine Commandant Lieutenant General Yoo Nak-jun. The new command will have authority not only over ground forces on the five islands but also over naval and air forces units. This command could serve as a model for additional joint commands.

The command was envisioned as a Northwest Command with broader authority. However, the South Korean Navy's resistance to the plan has resulted in a narrowing of the command's scope by adding "island" to the title and restricting the authority to two kilometers from the islands. As a result, the command encapsulates the good and bad of South Korean defense reform. It is an effective initiative, but the process suffers from service parochialism and a "don't break my rice bowl" mentality. In the future, Seoul should not allow parochial concerns to supersede national security interests.

After the command became operational in mid-2011, the geographic limit was removed and the commandant was given greater responsibility for ten provocation scenarios. Although a step in the right direction, it appears there is still confusion within the South Korean defense establishment over the rules of engagement and delineation of responsibilities among commanders.

DR 307 Improves South Korean Combat Capabilities

DR 307 lays a strong foundation for South Korea's planned transfer of wartime OPCON in 2015. Seoul should be commended for creating, for the first time, an organizational structure capable of assuming independent military command while the United States serves in a supporting role. The plan will enable South Korea to develop a more flexible and joint military force. By redressing the divided military command and administrative structure, Seoul will be able to exercise more effective joint command.

Currently, the deputy commander of Combined Forces Command serves as the ground component commander (GCC); the commander of

the U.S. 7th Fleet serves as the naval component commander; and the commander of the U.S. 7th Air Force serves as the air component commander (ACC). After OPCON transfer, the ROK army and navy chiefs of staff will serve as GCC and NCC, respectively. The commander of the U.S. 7th Air Force will remain as ACC.

South Korea is also putting into place programs to enhance its own strategic surveillance capabilities, thereby reducing its reliance on U.S. systems. If implemented, this will enable Seoul to improve its C4I significantly by deploying several systems:

- Korea Joint Command and Control System (KJCCS) to connect the JCS to each service;
- Military Information Management System (MIMS) to enable tactical-level cross-service interoperability;
- Joint Tactical Data Link System (JTDLS) to allow dissemination of digitalized tactical information between all services; and,
- Tactical Information Communication Network (TICN) providing real-time broadband communications.²¹

Revised Plan Still Faces Challenges

Strategic Improvements but Tactical Deficiencies

Without question, DR 307 will improve South Korea's ability to prevail in a major war against North Korea. However, DR 307 does not provide South Korea with the agility or military efficiency to respond to Pyongyang's tactical provocations. Furthermore, senior U.S. military officials have privately commented that South Korean forces are not currently organized for joint operations, particularly at the tactical level.

The South Korean military's tactical deficiencies are primarily the result of insufficient inter-connectivity between the various service branches. The military also lacks the necessary tactical C4ISR and training to conduct cross-service operations. The Combined Forces Command (CFC), which will cease after the transfer of wartime OPCON authority in 2015, provides cross-integration and jointness at subordinate levels. All South Korean units are tied into the CFC, which serves as the overall coordinating body for Seoul's military.

With cessation of the CFC looming, South Korea needs to put into place agile command and control structures that enable the rapid

application of appropriate joint military power at the tactical level with control at the operational or even strategic level. DR 307 does not fulfill this requirement—an oversight that must be addressed in the near future.

Still Requires Essential Funding

For all its improvements over earlier defense reform plans, DR 307 continues to face the same demographic and budget challenges. Like its predecessors, DR 307 remains reliant on government funding for required defense resources.

If fully funded, DR 307 will improve South Korea's military capabilities by altering the force structure and augmenting the combat power of units. The plan will compensate for decreased troop levels by increasing qualitative capabilities. In the past, South Korea has often purchased “shiny baubles” (high-tech weapons) without also acquiring necessary logistics, sustainment, training, C4ISR, and integration capabilities. Seoul must ensure that it does not repeat the same mistake as it moves forward with funding DR 307.

Avoiding such mistakes, however, also requires carrying through on promised upgrades in weapons and equipment. Unfortunately, there is no indication to date that DR 307 is any more likely to be fully funded than DRP 2020 was.

Legislature Delays Defense Reform

After pending for eleven months before the National Assembly, Defense Reform 307 legislation was eventually scrapped in April 2012 at the conclusion of the legislative term. The chairperson of the defense subcommittee (from the opposition party) refused to initiate the review process.

When the chairman of the National Defense Committee (from the ruling party) attempted to approve the legislation in April 2012, opposition party members refused to attend the meeting. The opposition party was driven more by intent to provide a political victory to President Lee Myung-bak rather than by substantive disagreement with the proposed legislation.²²

What the ROK Should Do

- **Fully fund defense requirements.** Budget shortfalls have always undermined attempts to reform South Korea's military. For any defense reform initiatives to take hold,

Seoul must ensure legislative approval of necessary laws and sufficient budgetary resources. Furthermore, entrenched defense interests will work to derail these reforms; overcoming such resistance will require the direct involvement from both the president and the minister of defense.

- **Procure proper equipment.** As the South Korean military continues to modernize, it must procure the right equipment, weapons, and force mix to provide strong deterrent and combat capabilities. Seoul should acquire:
 - Improved command, control, communication, computer, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance capabilities to enable integrated combat capabilities down to the tactical level. This improvement requires sensors such as AWACs and high-altitude UAVs as well as integrating command and communication systems.
 - Enhanced long-range precision-strike capabilities, including fifth-generation fighter aircraft, attack helicopters, precision-guided munitions, extended-range surface-to-surface missiles, and counter-battery radar and artillery systems.
 - Target-location and target-designation equipment for ground tactical teams' control of aerial delivered precision guided munitions.
 - Increased sealift and airlift for the Marine Corps by purchasing more amphibious ships, transport helicopters, and light armored-vehicles.
 - Flexible systems to fulfill multiple missions and enhance interoperability among services. For example, the Dokdo helicopter transport ship improves sealift, enables Marine amphibious assaults against North Korea, and supports overseas HADR and peacekeeping missions.
- **Adopt a “whole package” concept when purchasing new combat systems** by including funding for maintenance, supply, and training to prevent logistic shortfalls.

- **Create a joint task force headquarters for crisis response.** In order to conduct smaller-scale strike missions, the ROK should establish, equip, and train a standing joint task force headquarters directly subordinate to C/JCS. Similar to a U.S. Joint Task Force, there would not be a large number of units assigned to the headquarters. Instead, varying units would be assigned temporarily to the headquarters to conduct training for limited attack scenarios.

Developing a clearly defined unified command structure would enable Seoul to synchronize selected combat power from all of South Korea's military services. In doing so, the South Korean military could conduct limited but powerful retaliatory strike missions in response to North Korean military provocations and aggression.

- **Expand the South Korean Marine Corps.** Implementing the presidential task force's recommendation to add 4,000 Marines to the ROK Marine Corps would enhance the defense of the northwest islands, increase full-spectrum attack capabilities against the North, and support Seoul's "Global Korea" strategy by permitting greater off-peninsula participation in U.N. peacekeeping operations and other international security missions.
- **Deploy a multilayered missile defense system.** Such a system should be interoperable with a U.S. regional missile network to provide for a more coherent and effective defense of allied military facilities and the South Korean populace. This system would include purchasing and deploying PAC-3 ground-based missiles and SM-3 missiles and augmenting missile defense planning and exercises with the U.S. and Japan.

What the U.S. Should Do

Although defense reform is an internal South Korean issue, America's national interests remain at stake, as any reforms affect the alliance's capabilities against the multi-faceted North Korean military threat. It is therefore important for the United States to remain fully engaged in the evolution and implementation of DR 307.

- **The U.S. Congress and the South Korean National Assembly should hold public hearings regarding peninsular security issues.** These hearings should address what steps need to be taken to ensure that the alliance is still able to deter, defend, and defeat any North Korean aggression. Maintaining transparency between the allies and the populaces of both South Korea and the United States is necessary to secure strong public support for defense reform initiatives and U.S. military forces on the Korean Peninsula.

These hearings should also provide a threat assessment of North Korea's military; the roles, missions, and capabilities of South Korean forces; their relationship with U.S. forces both pre- and post-transfer of wartime OPCON; and requisite funding levels. Both countries should determine necessary defense funding levels, identify any potential shortfalls, and review the plans to redress them.

- **Washington should accept South Korea's request to extend its ballistic missile range.** As South Korea prepares to assume greater responsibility for its own defense, it makes sense for Seoul to be able to hold all North Korean targets at risk. Currently, Seoul's surface-to-surface ballistic missiles are limited to a range of 300 kilometers; this should be extended to 1,000 km. Washington's agreement to the range extension should come in return for greater South Korean participation in a comprehensive allied missile defense system.
- **Washington must maintain a robust forward-deployed military presence in South Korea.** Such a presence is necessary to defend a critical ally and maintain peace in Northeast Asia. The Obama Administration should therefore emphasize its commitment both to maintaining U.S. forces at the promised 28,500 troop level and to augmenting those forces during a crisis in order to deter, defend against, and defeat security threats to the region.

Washington should also affirm its unequivocal commitment to defending South Korea by maintaining the threefold U.S. promise of extended deterrence comprised of conventional

forces, missile defense, and the nuclear umbrella.

- **Congress should fully fund ongoing U.S. military realignment plans in South Korea and Japan.** These plans include the Yongsan base relocation, land partnership plan, and family housing for accompanied tours. Planned cuts by the U.S. Senate Armed Services Committee would undermine years of carefully crafted diplomacy that achieved U.S. strategic objectives and resolved contentious issues with its allies.

Potential additional \$500 billion cuts in the defense budget would have a devastating impact on the U.S. ability to deter security threats in Asia, protect American national interests, and fulfill U.S. defense treaty obligations to critical allies in the region.

- **The United States should augment deployments and training exercises in South Korea by:**
 - **Increasing** training deployments of the 31st Marine Expeditionary Unit (stationed on Okinawa) to South Korea to facilitate improvement of South Korean Marine capabilities as part of DR 307 and Northwest Island Command;
 - **Demonstrating** that the strategic flexibility strategy²³ also works to South Korea's advantage by including U.S. combat units deployed from the United States and U.S. forward bases in Asia in future training exercises on the Korean Peninsula;
 - **Increasing** the scope and frequency of naval exercises, including U.S. carriers, particularly in the West Sea;
 - **Returning** an Army attack helicopter battalion to South Korea; and
 - **Forward deploying** an additional U.S. Air Force combat fighter squadron to South Korea.²⁴

A Critical Journey Begins

South Korea has begun a necessary though difficult journey to modernize its military structure and implement a more effective command structure. For this, America's ally should be strongly commended. The benefits of such reform are impressive: DR 307 will enable South Korea to assume the mantle of wartime operational control in 2015 more effectively. The defense reform plan also improves Seoul's ability to conduct large-scale military operations in response to any North Korean invasion.

Yet questions remain about Seoul's ability to respond to limited North Korean attacks and provocations, such as those against the *Cheonan* and Yeonpyeong Island. Washington should work with its ally to ensure that South Korea can respond to any future attack. At the same time, however, the United States should ensure that any response is proportional and confined to the area of attack in order to prevent a tactical confrontation from escalating to an all-out conflict.

While North Korean threats will remain the paramount focus of the U.S.–South Korean alliance, neither country should lose sight of the benefits of Seoul's "going global" with its political, economic, and military capabilities. The Joint Vision for the Alliance announced by Presidents Obama and Lee in June 2009 called for building a comprehensive strategic alliance that addressed not only bilateral concerns, but regional and global issues as well.²⁵

South Korea's military has played a useful role in previous multinational efforts against common security threats in Asia and worldwide. Given its increased fears of the North Korean threat, the ROK populace may not support overseas peacekeeping missions. Yet such missions can provide indirect planning and training for North Korean collapse scenarios.

Seoul should also be encouraged to assume a greater role on the world stage, one that is commensurate with its growing capabilities. South Korea serves as a shining example of how a small nation can benefit from the international community. In turn, this "miracle on the Han River" can now reach out to assist other nations.

Notes:

¹ Wartime OPCON Transition will shift from a command system centered on the ROK–U.S. Combined Forces Command to a new combined defense system led by the South Korean Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) and supported by a to-be-

created U.S. Korea Command. In 2006, President Roh Moo-hyun requested that the U.S. return wartime operational control (OPCON) of ROK forces. In 2007, the U.S. and South Korea agreed to OPCON transfer in April 2012. The transfer was subsequently postponed until 2015.

² During the 42nd U.S.–South Korean Security Consultative Meeting in October 2010, the two sides agreed that the U.S. commitment to provide extended deterrence included “the full range of military capabilities, to include the U.S. nuclear umbrella, conventional strike, and missile defense capabilities.” United States and Republic of Korea, “Joint Communiqué: The 42nd U.S.–ROK Security Consultative Meeting,” October 8, 2010, at <http://www.defense.gov/news/d20101008usrok.pdf>.

³ Bruce W. Bennett, “A Brief Analysis of the Republic of Korea’s Defense Reform Plan,” RAND Corporation Occasional Paper No. OP-165-OSD, December 2005, at http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/occasional_papers/2006/RAND_OP165.pdf.

⁴ Bruce W. Bennett, “Managing Catastrophic North Korea Risks,” *The Korea Herald*, January 21, 2010.

⁵ Paek Jae-ok, “Analysis of the ROK Defense Budget for 2010,” Korea Institute for Defense Analyses, ROK Angle: Korea’s Defense Policy, Issue 21, January 26, 2010, at www.kida.re.kr/eng/pcrm/newsletter/download.asp?newsletter=221; Republic of Korea, Ministry of National Defense, 2008 Defense White Paper, July 3, 2009, at http://www.mnd.go.kr/cms_file/info/mndpaper/e2008_all.pdf.

⁶ Transcript, “Conversation with Dr. Bruce Bennett and Dr. Kim Taewoo,” Asan Institute for Policy Studies, April 19, 2011, at http://www.asaninst.org/upload_eng/board_files/file1_278.pdf.

⁷ Jung Sung-ki, “Defense Reform Faces Overhaul,” *Korea Times*, August 27, 2008, at http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2011/04/116_30141.html.

⁸ Bennett, “Managing Catastrophic North Korea Risks.”

⁹ Bruce Bechtol, “The U.S. and South Korea: Prospects for Transformation, Combined Forces Operations, and Wartime Operational Control: Problems and Remedies,” *International Journal of Korean Studies*, Vol. XIII, No. 2 (Fall/Winter 2009), pp. 71–96.

¹⁰ Republic of Korea, Ministry of National Defense, “Defense Ministry Unveils Defense Reform,” March 9, 2011, at http://www.mnd.go.kr/mndEng_2009/WhatsNew/RecentNews (October 12, 2011); KBS World, “Defense Reform Plan 307,” March 9, 2011, at http://rki.kbs.co.kr/english/news/news_issue_

detail.htm?lang=e¤t_page=4&No=21105.

¹¹ When approved by the National Assembly, the plan will be renamed Defense Reform 11-30, indicating that it covers the years 2011 to 2030. Some in the South Korean defense establishment already refer to it by this name. For ease of readership, the plan is referred to as DR 307 throughout this paper.

¹² In March 2010, a North Korean submarine sank the South Korean naval corvette *Cheonan* in South Korean territorial waters, killing 46 sailors. In November 2010, North Korean artillery shelled South Korea's Yeonpyeong Island, killing two civilians and two Marines.

¹³ Author interview with U.S. defense official, April 2011.

¹⁴ "The Korean Peninsula: Rising Military Tensions and the ROK's Changing Foreign and Defense Policy," chap. 3, in National Institute for Defense Studies (Japan), *East Asian Strategic Review 2011*, May 2011, p.101, at http://www.nids.go.jp/english/publication/east-asian/pdf/2011/eastasian_e2011_03.pdf

¹⁵ Jung Sunk-ki, "Navy to Focus on Littoral Warfare," *Korea Times*, September 15, 2010, at http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2010/09/205_73102.html.

¹⁶ Editorial, "Changing Course?" *The Korea Herald*, September 24, 2010.

¹⁷ Yonhap News, "Defense Chief Unveils Plans to Reform Military, Enhance Interoperability," March 8, 2011, at <http://english.yonhapnews.co.kr/national/2011/03/08/69/0301000000AEN20110308011300315F.html>.

¹⁸ Republic of Korea, Ministry of National Defense, 2010 Defense White Paper, May 5, 2011, p. 136, at http://www.mnd.go.kr/cms_file/info/mndpaper/2010/2010WhitePaperAll_eng.pdf

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 144.

²⁰ Republic of Korea, Ministry of National Defense, "Defense Ministry Unveils New Defense Reform."

²¹ Major Fred L. Huh, "Azimuth Check: An Analysis of Military Transformation in the Republic of Korea—Is It Sufficient?" School of Advanced Military Studies, U.S. Military Command and General Staff College, March 12, 2009, at <http://www.dtic.mil/cgibin/GetTRDoc?AD=ADA522032&Location=U2&doc=GetTRDoc.pdf>

²² Author interview with senior South Korean defense official, April 2012.

²³ Under the strategic flexibility strategy, U.S. forces in South Korea could deploy off the peninsula to respond to other crises. Seoul has worried that any redeployment could become permanent, resulting in a reduced U.S. military presence and perceived a reduction in the U.S. commitment to defend South Korea.

²⁴ General B.B. Bell, “What Must Be Done About North Korea,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, Office of the Korea Chair, December 14, 2010, at http://csis.org/files/publication/101214_What_must_be_done_about_North_Korea_Platform.pdf

²⁵ The White House, “Joint Vision for the Alliance of the United States of America and the Republic of Korea,” June 16, 2009, at http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Joint-vision-for-the-alliance-of-the-United-States-of-America-and-the-Republic-of-Korea