

## **South Korea's Growing Role and Contributions to International Stability** by Scott Snyder

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Get ready for a new South Korea. The country is well known as an export powerhouse despite the struggling global economy. Samsung, Hyundai, and most recently Psy's YouTube hit "Gangnam Style" enjoy unprecedented popularity and profits around the world. But even more impressive than its export growth is South Korea's emergence as a producer rather than a consumer of international security goods despite an ongoing threat from North Korea. These contributions to a wide range of global peacekeeping and stabilization operations are all the more impressive because they entail cost and sacrifice for global stability not directly tied to tangible returns on investment. As a newly elected member of the UN Security Council during 2013 and 2014, South Korea has the opportunity to use these investments as a "middle power" and responsible leader in the international community.

The rationale for increasing its contribution to international security is clear given South Korea's dependence on exports for economic growth. Global stability is the prerequisite for growth in global trade. But the need for this new outlook only became clear when South Korea started to look at its security needs through a broader lens than just North Korea. Previously, South Korean attention was fixed on how to preserve stability on the Korean Peninsula and every demand for help from the international community was viewed on the basis of whether it would weaken or strengthen US commitments to preserve security. But Korea's global stake in stability requires security planners to consider Korea's security needs in a broader context. The Lee Myung-Bak administration's "Global Korea" concept provided the conceptual basis for this new approach.

The 2010 Defense White Paper establishes contributions to international stability as a third strategic priority alongside the defense of South Korea and Korean reunification. South Korea has set in place a legal framework and dedicated capacity to play an ongoing role in international peacekeeping with plans to develop a standing force of 3,000 troops for peacekeeping operations, expedited procedures for securing National Assembly approval to participate in such operations, and active efforts both to adhere to international nonproliferation standards and to work with others to strengthen their own training and capacity to implement these capabilities.

South Korea's overall defense expenditures rank 12th in the world, just ahead of the military budgets of established middle powers and longstanding contributors to international security such as Canada and Australia. South Korea's budget for international security operations has more than tripled between 2007 and 2010 and the number of South Korean soldiers deployed for overseas missions has increased from 387 to 808 during the same period, representing a modest but significant contribution to a wide array of operations. These include UN peacekeeping deployments to Haiti and Lebanon, contributions of a destroyer crew and Navy SEALs to the multilateral antipiracy mission in the Gulf of Aden, and the dispatch of military troops to protect South Korean post-conflict stabilization projects in Afghanistan, including the building of a hospital and other development projects undertaken by a Provincial Reconstruction Team in Parwan province.

To be sure, there are obstacles to the continuation of Korea's active global security role. North Korean destabilization, a potential shift in course under a new leadership following December presidential elections, a withdrawal of South Korean public support in the event that ROK forces posted overseas endure major casualties, and long-term downsizing of the South Korean military resulting from demographic pressures and declining population growth are factors that could keep South Korea from growing its international security capabilities and contributions. But these factors have thus far proved manageable, especially given South Korea's dependency on export growth to power its economy, and the resulting need for global stability.

South Korea has good reasons to sustain and expand its current contributions to international stability efforts. First, ROK military contributions to international stabilization operations enhance Seoul's aspirations for international respect by reinforcing positive perceptions of South Korea as a contributor of public goods. Second, ROK participation in international stabilization operations may one day have practical application to South Korean security in the event of North Korea's destabilization. Third, with respect to nuclear safety and security, South Korean nonproliferation efforts directly reinforce the country's emergence as an exporter of nuclear energy plants. Finally, South Korean capabilities have primarily occurred outside Asia, but they may constitute a future contribution to regional stability within Asia. Given South Korea's growing aspirations to play an international leadership role, South Korean contributions to global stability will continue to grow while global fiscal pressures and accompanying prospects for instability make such contributions all the more valued.

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