

The New Chairman of the JCS and South Korea's Evolving Military Strategy by Sukjoon Yoon

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South Korea's armed forces have a new chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS). Adm. Chie Yoonhee, the former chief of naval operations, is President Park Gyuen-hye's surprising nominee, the first who isn't a member of the army. Given the North Korean ground forces deployed near the DMZ, the army has long been a significant political force, and the navy has always been regarded as lacking the ability to conduct "Joint" and "Combined" military operations on the Korean Peninsula. Despite strong lobbying by the army, Park has given strong support to Choi, and it is to be hoped that a rotational system among the three services will now be established.

Why has the line of four-star army generals been interrupted? There are probably two reasons.

South Korea as a Strong Maritime Nation

First, South Korea's national security environment has changed. Speaking last month at the 60th anniversary of the ROK Coast Guard, President Park declared that South Korea is effectively an island, rather than, as historically defended, a peninsula. Geography has determined Korea's national character and international status, but since the division of the Korean Peninsula into two separate republics, South Korea has become heavily reliant upon sea-borne trade, which accounts for more than 90 percent of its overseas trade goods and more than 99 percent of crude oil. South Korea is a maritime power, globally ranking 13th in GDP, but ninth in maritime trade, fifth in container processing capability and first in shipbuilding capacity. A changing geopolitical and geo-economic maritime context and the consequent new threats forced South Korea to reverse its traditional strategic mindset captured by the phrase "land is primary, sea is secondary." Park's speech paid special attention to safeguarding the ROK's maritime sovereignty - long regarded as the most sensitive issue in maritime relations with neighboring countries - and clearly acknowledged that South Korea's national prosperity and development is dependent upon its control of the surrounding seas.

Time for a new military strategy

Second, considering the changing security environment of the Korean Peninsula, adjustments to military strategy are required. In recent decades, most confrontation and conflict with North Korea has occurred at sea, mostly in the West Sea, which is the military operational flank of the North Korean capital, Pyongyang, as well as being strategically essential to

the Chinese capital, and to other major cities, including Shanghai and Tianjin. The JCS, led by army generals, has failed to show effective leadership in dealing with these sea battles and naval skirmishes, as demonstrated by the lack of an immediate response to the 2010 sinking of the ROKS *Cheonan*. President Park mentioned "strong maritime power" four times in her relatively brief speech at Incheon; and given North Korea's fragile political and economic situation, as well as ongoing regional and international geopolitical shifts, with China emerging as a major maritime power, it is imperative for South Korea to articulate its future military strategy as a balanced mix of land and sea forces. The traditional army-oriented system of joint and combined, primarily land-based, military operations, has overstated the integrity of the ROK armed forces. It is time to establish land-sea military operations, following the surprising demonstration of long-range cruise missiles and land attack missiles that can be launched by submarines and surface combatants at the 65th anniversary of the foundation of the ROK Armed Force on Oct. 1.

Given its expanding international trade, it is appropriate for South Korea to build up its maritime influence at home and abroad. South Korea has become an important military actor, contributing to more than 30 peacekeeping forces worldwide. The ROK Navy *Cheonghae* Task Force has been conducting high-seas anti-piracy operations in the Indian Ocean region since 2009; and an ROKN destroyer equipped with the *Aegis* air-defense system successfully tracked and recovered the debris from a North Korean long-range rocket launch. South Korean national military strategy no longer revolves around ideological and military confrontation with the North, but should focus primarily upon potential maritime conflicts with maritime powers. China launched its first aircraft carrier, the *Liaoning*, last year, and Japan's *Izumo*, a helicopter-carrying destroyer displacing 20,000 tons, in effect an aircraft carrier, is due for delivery in 2015.

A proactive military and a more cooperative posture

New concepts in military strategy are being developed that focus on "homeland security" and simultaneously pursue "engaged internationalism." South Korea is deploying state-of-the-art military technology to become an agile and flexible expeditionary military power, moving beyond simply reacting to Korean Peninsula problems and seeking to develop a proactive capacity to deter North Korean military threats. This shift was driven by the sinking of the *Cheonan* in March 2010 and the artillery bombardment of Yeonpyeong Island in November 2010. So far, however, the ROK's proactive new military strategy has been constrained by the Rules of Engagement (ROE) and Operation Control (OPCON) imposed by the Combined Forces Command (CFC) controlled by the United States.

Since the North Korean attacks of 2010, there has been widespread criticism of South Korean military strategy. Many have asked why the JCS did not mount an immediate response; and some have focused on the ROE and OPCON, seeking to reconsider the principle of never shooting first. These tensions were highlighted by the hastily arranged diplomatic and military bilateral consultations between the ROK and the US in the aftermath of the attacks. Former ROK Army Gen. Kim Kwanjin was appointed defense minister in November 2010, and at his confirmation hearing in the National Assembly he advocated a tough and combat-ready posture to any future North Korean provocations. Kim is still proposing offensive-defense rather than defense *per se*, moderating the self-restraint that is a feature of current ROE and reinforcing the Spike missile batteries on Yeonpyeong Island to balance the huge North Korean artillery presence in the West Sea. His hardline stance was somewhat validated last month near the Han estuary, when ROK Marines shot dead a South Korean who was attempting to swim to North Korea.

Enhanced cooperation with adjacent maritime powers is the other aspect of the new strategic thinking, and Adm. Choi's visit to Beijing and Qingdao in July 2013 is a clear signal of improved military ties between China and South Korea. Given the close cooperation between the ROK Navy and the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) in dealing with illicit Chinese fisheries in the vicinity of the Northern Limit Line, it was not surprising that Choi and his delegation were allowed to observe PLAN submarines and a recently commissioned surface combatant during discussions with the PLAN's Commander, Adm. Wu Shengli. There is a turbulent history between the two navies including skirmishes near Yeonpyeong Island in 1999 and 2003, but the current moves toward closer cooperation should do much to reduce the possibility of serious military confrontation.

What should Adm. Choi do?

Both these trends – a more proactive military posture toward North Korea, and enhanced cooperative military diplomacy toward China and Japan – should be followed through now that the JCS is led by Adm. Choi. The incoming chairman must deal with some tricky problems: steep competition between the three services over reforms proposed by Lee Myung-bak's government, the restarting of the acquisition process for the next-generation stealthy aircraft due to financial constraints, and the OPCON transfer from CFC to ROK JCS due in December 2015. Recent informal intelligence indicates continuing North Korea preparations for further military provocations, including restarting the Yongbyon nuclear reactor and setting up another long-range missile at the Tongchang-ri launch site. Adm. Choi will need a balanced and cooperative approach in his new assignment.

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