



DON'T LOSE SIGHT OF QUIET CHANGES TO SOUTH KOREA'S DEFENSE POSTURE

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Important changes are occurring in the Republic of Korea's (ROK) defense posture. They are subtle, nascent, and frequently obscured by more high-profile diplomacy involving North Korea, either directly in inter-Korean relations or refracted through the US-North Korea relationship. Still, the changes in Seoul's defense capabilities are significant and deserve more attention. These developments include progress in both ROK hardware and software, from investments in and fielding of new platforms, to ROK assessments and concept development. They attest to an increasingly capable ROK military that is at the frontlines of shifting geostrategic dynamics. Amid contentious negotiations over sharing costs, they show how the ROK is already sharing a greater burden of defense in support of alliance interests. As the value of alliances is being debated, these changes highlight the strategic value of US-ROK defense cooperation.

National security traditionalists are wary of progressive administrations in Seoul. The left's

prioritization of engagement with North Korea creates tensions, especially when Pyongyang continues to enhance its military capabilities while denouncing efforts to bolster ROK defense and the ROK-US alliance. Further, complaints from the North about the alliance find a sympathetic ear among some South Korean constituencies that view the United States as an impediment to inter-Korean relations. Unsurprisingly, the Moon administration's prioritization of engagement with the North has prompted concern that it is degrading defense capabilities and relations with the United States.

This angst is based on an oversimplified assessment. It ignores the fact that President Moon and other progressive leaders recognize that the alliance – albeit in need of reforms – is critical to ROK security. It veils the opportunities that arise from progressive administrations investing more in ROK defense, modernizing military forces, and increasing the potential for a more mature and strategic security partnership.

The Moon administration has ensured that the ROK military is getting [more funding](#). In 2018, the defense budget increased 7%. In 2019, the budget grew 8.2%. According to the [Midterm Defense Plan for 2020-2024](#), the administration's budget for force improvement programs is 103.8 trillion won – an average annual increase of 10.3%. This funds the acquisition, development, and fielding of capabilities – some of which the ROK has independently pursued and others which have been identified (with the United States) as being mission critical. The tangible effect of this is a ROK military more capable of taking greater responsibility for its own defense and thus contributing more to shared alliance interests.

Second, ROK defense policy is evolving in important and distinctive ways. Two elements stand out: an underlying assessment that the regional security order is shifting and the subsequent [broadening of policy scope](#) from predominantly peninsular focused to omnidirectional. Security planners are increasingly concerned about threats that originate outside the Korean Peninsula, particularly from the west. Although considerable attention is given to challenges with Japan, the real long-term strategic concern is China. In recent meetings in South Korea, deterrence-

related discussions focused on China with some mention of Russia, but none of Japan.

Finally, a third important development is in doctrine, and these changes reflect the shift or re-balancing of threat perceptions. China poses a fundamentally different set of challenges than does North Korea: its capabilities are vastly different as are its vulnerabilities. ROK strategists start by acknowledging those asymmetries and they are developing a defense doctrine that attempts to exploit them to Seoul's advantage. They admit that South Korea could never have a "big punch" that would have a big impact on China or other great military powers. Instead, if required, Seoul should aim to exploit "small punches" with psychological and strategic impact to achieve a "butterfly effect." This includes using precision strikes in creative ways that also leverage South Korea's geostrategic position to have greater consequences.

Another theme that is increasingly the focus of deterrence thinking is the dynamic exchange between an increasingly fluid strategic environment and hyper action-reaction cycles. Militaries act – creating policies, doctrines, roles, and missions – and adversaries respond in kind, attempting to exploit the new vulnerabilities and opportunities that emerge. This triggers its own response and a new action-reaction cycle is initiated. Deterrence has always been about a dynamic between two adversaries within the context of an evolving strategic environment. The development of new technologies, however, is accelerating fluidity and increasing responsiveness to a degree that is causing shifts in deterrence requirements rather than movement along a linear path. ROK security specialists continue to develop concepts in which conventional means can be used or messaged across domains in different combinations to enhance their effects while considering escalation dynamics.

Relatedly, Korean strategists underscore the vulnerabilities of deterrence concepts based on a fixed theoretical order or understanding, when in practice much is dynamic and/or unknowable. "Change is the only constant," as Heraclitus said. Militaries must continually assess the evolution of an adversary's intentions and defined interests, as well as determine

how far the other government will go in its defense. Moreover, in the current period of strategic flux and transformation, there must be greater acceptance – and, if possible, exploitation – of uncertainty. Past thinking acknowledged the need to integrate "unknowns" – both known and unknown. Now, given its prevalence, this factor must be more effectively used as an opportunity to gain advantage. The art of strategy must be emphasized, with militaries becoming less doctrinaire. Speed and flexibility in messaging and actions will be critical in an ambiguous environment. Adversaries are deliberately pursuing incremental gains and conducting limited objective attacks to deny culpability and obscure their ways and ends. Reactive postures tethered to fixed requirements purposefully avoided by adversaries are paralyzing and self-defeating.

This evolution is in its early stages, but already faces significant obstacles and can shift in various directions. Defense officials concede that efforts to develop new thinking have been inhibited by competing priorities that are shaped by other demands from their political leadership. Limited bandwidth, if not deliberate self-censoring, makes it difficult for the military to strengthen its posture while supporting the Moon government's prioritization of engagement with North Korea. South Korea's economic relationship with China continues to provide Beijing ample means to pressure Seoul, although previous attempts to do that – punishing the ROK after it agreed to deploy missile defense systems – backfired; that effort poisons feelings toward China to this day. ROK investment in defense will mean a more capable US partner with the potential to contribute more to shared alliance interests, but a factor driving ROK defense development is also uncertainty about the United States. Ultimately, under-acknowledged changes in ROK defense are resulting in missed opportunities to strengthen ROK security and its partnership with the United States.

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