



## ***WHY THE KOREAN RESERVE FORCES SHOULD EMULATE THE US SYSTEM***

BY JAMES JB PARK

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Under the existing Republic of Korea-United States defense arrangement, in the event of war in the Korean Theater of Operations (KTO), combined component commands—air, naval, ground, and marine corps—under the Korea-US Combined Forces Command (CFC) play vital roles in maintaining the rock-solid combined defense posture that defends the lives of innocent citizens in Korea. One exceptional element within such commands is the Combined Ground Component Command, CGCC, led solely by the four-star ROK ground operations commander, unlike the other component commands mostly commanded by US generals. The CGCC, comprised of about 350,000 ROK soldiers and a couple of war-time augmented US divisions, is a striking exception to the Pershing Principle, which states that no US troops are commanded by any foreign military power, and therefore is an epitome of the US commitment to defending democracy in Korea.

However, the CGCC is at a critical juncture not due to any external aggression, but because of Korea's extremely low birthrate at 0.7 children per woman. In 2023, personnel previously exempted from military service, such as cancer patients and others with incurable diseases, are exponentially being assigned to active service or at least supplementary service. At this rate, the number of conscripts available in any

given year in the 2030s is projected to be around 180,000. This falls short of what is needed to maintain a combat-ready posture, especially when considering the “3-1 rule (ratio) of land combat” against the 1.2 million North Korean active personnel. Hence, Korea must instead beef up its reserve force, estimated at 2.7 million, to strive to maintain the readiness posture.

Of course, this proposal to strengthen the reserve is not a new one and stems from the current birthrate crisis in Korea, a stark contrast to a decade ago, when the number of new conscripts exceeded the established annual threshold of 300,000. The military also adhered to an unspoken rule that reserve trainings should not be challenging; however, times have changed. As part of the recent Ministry of National Defense's (MND) re-enlistment pilot program up to 5,000 personnel, discharged reserve soldiers, non-commissioned officers, and officers are increasingly answering the call. While the current registered number per se, at few hundreds, is not substantial, what is truly problematic is that those few reserve forces cannot completely assume active duties, but only reserve tasks, which hinders the integration of the active and reserve forces. Moreover, due to the MND pushing for more demanding reserve trainings, the on-site commanders increasingly rely on symbolic incentives, such as dismissing the top-performing squads early or presenting awards, which has generated resentment among young servicemen who feel they have legally fulfilled their obligations during their active service, but are, all of a sudden, forced to do more without any tangible benefits. Those not wanting to be dismissed early have no motivation train hard, additionally.

The rigid separation between the active and reserve components (and between peacetime and war) inhibits the overall enhancement of the ROK armed forces' capabilities and defense readiness posture. Similar to the U.S. reserve force system, facilitating re-enlistment into active positions and establishing a standing reserve force even during peacetime for integrated training of active and reserve servicemen is crucial. This approach enhances interoperability between the active and the reserve and independent mission capabilities of the reserve force in the absence

of an active force, as demonstrated by the Ukraine-Russian war driven by reserve forces.

The Yoon Suk Yeol administration has been gung-ho about ROK's prospects as a "global pivotal state." Regarding many areas of governance and statecraft, his determination seems well-received, both domestically and internationally. The consequence, though, means that the ROK armed forces must take on more significant roles in the region as per the raised expectations of the West. However, achieving this goal is unattainable without the ROK Army, which is not only the largest standing army in East Asia's democratic countries but also the first-responder against authoritarianism in the region, adeptly utilizing both its active and reserve forces as the situation demands.

A new reserve system must then prioritize material incentives over symbolic ones, as many younger servicemen are no longer solely motivated by patriotism and camaraderie. The aforesaid approach of assigning extra duties to young soldiers without offering tangible rewards would backfire. Implementing a legislative framework for an institutionalized reserve system, supported by monetary compensations and other benefits, is essential.

Ensuing financial challenges are a concern. However, while such apprehensions related to maintaining a standing reserve force during peacetime are valid, neglecting to enhance the capabilities of the reserve component would incur greater costs at the onset of war. The sheer number, 2.7 million, may appear substantial, but the overwhelming majority of these 2.7 million ROK reserve servicemen primarily serve as [riflemen](#) and have limited access to the latest weaponry and advanced systems—communication, fires, administrative, and so on—that the active component operates. This significant disparity in capabilities and expertise could lead to catastrophic consequences when the active force is absent.

Some might propose a mass-manufacturing of drones and robots, but once (and if) both sides' drones face attrition, traditional infantry urban warfare would most definitely ensue. The presence of numerous

cities with millions of citizens and critical infrastructure and buildings acts as a multi-layered defense north and around Seoul. Furthermore, North Korea's significant special warfare forces, expected to be deployed to the rear areas south of Seoul and Camp Humphreys, necessitate a bolstered reserve force to counter them. This underscores the justification for maintaining a robust reserve force to secure the rear areas.

The state of affairs in East Asia is tempestuous. The ROK armed forces have been serving as the aegis of Korean citizens. However, ROK military brass may soon have to deploy its force overseas to defend other democracies. In such scenarios, the dwindling active force cannot be deemed sufficient. To face these evolving challenges, strengthening and utilizing the reserve is imperative.

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