



***SOUTH KOREA'S MILITARY:
NAVIGATING EXTERNAL AND
INTERNAL CHALLENGES***

BY YERIN YOON

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South Korea, now the world's [sixth-ranked](#) military power, has demonstrated remarkable strategic and technological prowess. The signing of the Washington Declaration in April between South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol and US President Joe Biden marked a pivotal moment in bolstering nuclear deterrence on the Korean Peninsula. Complementing this pact, the establishment of the Nuclear Consultative Group fortifies South Korea's security infrastructure, providing a shield against regional threats.

Nonetheless, this triumph overshadows a dual crisis—both external and internal—facing the South Korean military.

External challenges: Multilayered geopolitical risks

South Korea continues to grapple with the intractable crisis emanating from North Korea. Despite diplomatic efforts, North Korea's missile launches in [2022](#) surged significantly. North Korea also recently announced that it has successfully tested a solid-fuel engine for a new intermediate-range ballistic missile, presenting the capacity for surprise attacks without the need for refueling. This appears to be the natural course for North Korea since the failure of the Hanoi summit in 2019, after which it abandoned efforts to

normalize relations with the United States and turned to strengthening ties with China and Russia.

South Korea's security considerations are also entangled in the complex dynamics of the Great Power Competition between the United States and China, especially in the Taiwan Strait. The Possibility of US-China military confrontations, coupled with escalating military tensions in the Taiwan Strait, raises the specter of a "Taiwan contingency." In the event of Chinese aggression against Taiwan, South Korea would face a critical decision regarding its support for the United States. While no nation wants conflict, South Korea has two strong arguments to align with Washington in the Taiwan Strait, primarily to enhance regional security.

Primarily, South Korea would suffer significant economic losses if the Taiwan Strait were blocked, limiting crucial maritime security in the South China Sea. The strategic significance of this waterway extends beyond regional maritime security, directly impacting South Korea's trade-dependent economy. As more than 90% of the nation's energy imports and 30% of its total annual imports traverse this area, any disruption would have comprehensive consequences.

Secondly, the potential for armed conflict heightens the pressure on the South Korean military. The United States, increasingly alarmed by a possible Taiwan crisis, might redirect its forces, including the US Forces Korea. This relocation could create an unstable security vacuum on the Korean Peninsula, placing a heavier burden on South Korea to manage risks raised by North Korea. In this scenario, the South Korean government finds itself torn between its historical alliance with the United States and the delicate intricacies of its relationship with China. While South Korea's military has refrained from direct comments on the Taiwan contingency, President Yoon's firm opposition to China's attempts to alter the status quo in the South China Sea, expressed during his interview with [Reuters](#) in April, underscores the necessity to think ahead.

These external challenges compound the internal struggles of South Korea's military, placing the

nation's leaders in a precarious position. The responses to these external threats will have far-reaching implications for South Korea's geopolitical positioning and determine its immediate security posture.

Internal challenges: Structural changes demanded for manpower shortages

The internal challenges confronting South Korea's military extend beyond the persistent shortage of manpower. The allure of a military career has significantly waned attributed to modest salaries, poor working conditions, and an outdated military culture struggling to keep pace with modern expectations, especially for younger generations. Although President Yoon has pledged [\\$1,500](#) per month for conscripts to raise morale, ironically has the opposite effect on career soldiers. It exacerbates recruitment difficulties, as career soldiers including staff sergeants and second lieutenants who rank above conscripts, start with salaries around [\\$1,300](#). This potential inverted salary structure dissuades young professionals from applying. While Yoon's administration has announced a salary increase of up to 2.5% for all career soldiers in 2024, this incremental adjustment has yet to mitigate the existing challenges. Additionally, the current personnel shortage further intensifies the burden and workload on those who remain, contributing to the departure of young career soldiers and exacerbating the military's overall manpower crisis.

The dwindling appeal of a military career is clearly

reflected in military academies' weakening popularity over the past five years. This phenomenon is highly symbolic, as military academies serve as the cornerstone for supporting professional soldiers. The application ratio for military academies serves as a striking example: the Naval Academy's application ratio plummeted from 38.5:1 (one applicant accepted out of every 38.5 who apply) in 2019 to 18.7:1 in 2023. This trend consistent across other military academies, with the Army ROTC opening additional recruitment rounds in 2023 for the first time due to insufficient applications. This decline is also evident in the recruitment of noncommissioned officers (NCOs), with an overall Army NCOs recruitment rate of just 77.1% across all branches in 2022, falling short of objectives. To be specific, the sharp decrease of commissioned NCOs in the third quarter of 2023—only 48 commissioned compared to 524 the previous year—underscores the severity of the situation.

The dropping birth rate in South Korea further exacerbates these challenges. The birth rate, alarmingly low at 0.7 births per woman in 2023's second quarter—worse than during Europe's [Black Death](#) in 14th century—signals a dire future for military recruitment. With the continuous decline of the birth rate, fewer troops will be an inescapable reality, as the conscription system is inherently tied to the population's size. Reflecting this trend, the Ministry of National Defense removed the target figure of [500,000](#) reserve forces from the Law on Defense Reform in 2023, acknowledging the inevitability of a downsized military and the urgent need to reform the entire military structure at its roots.

Comparison of professional soldier pay and entry-level officers (monthly)
(Unit: Thousand Won)

Division		2022	2023	2024	2025
Soldier's Salary	Wages (Sergeant's Wage Basis)	676	1,000	1,250	1,500
	Government Contribution to Savings Plan	141	300	400	550
	Subtotal	817	1,300	1,650	2,050
Sergeant Basic Salary	Sergeant 1 st Class	1,705	1,771	1,815	Undefined
Ensign Basic Salary	Ensign 1 st Class	1,756	1,785	1,830	

Source: Ministry of Defense

Note: \$1 = 1,300 won

The way forward: Crafting a resilient future

South Korea's military stands at a crossroads, demanding strategic foresight and prudent decision-making. Crafting a resilient future requires a dual focus: addressing both external geopolitical risks and internal organizational hurdles.

In the realm of external threats, foremost is the escalating challenge posed by North Korea's advanced missile technology. South Korea must intensify its missile defense capabilities and enhance its intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) systems. This involves not only technological upgrades but also deeper strategic coordination with allies, particularly the United States and Japan. The recent trilateral cooperation, including the Camp David Summit, is a positive step. The South Korean government should actively draw its trilateral cooperation out to deal with these threats, with application of the Nuclear Consultative Group and the subsequent implementation of practical steps. A more concrete and regularized defense framework should be enacted.

Regarding a potential Taiwan contingency, South Korea must prepare for indirect impacts, such as regional destabilization and trade disruptions. Strengthening naval capabilities and securing maritime supply routes becomes crucial under cooperation with the US Navy. In addition to extended nuclear deterrence, South Korea's military readiness against conventional armed attacks by North Korea should be prepared in the event of redeployment of the USFK.

Internally, the chronic manpower shortage in the military requires a multifaceted approach: embracing technological advancements to supplement human roles, particularly in non-combat operations; integrating civilian experts into specialized military roles; considering partnerships with private security corporations for non-critical functions; and actively recruiting and deploying female personnel.

Furthermore, cultural transformation within the military is essential. This includes improving living and working conditions in the barracks, offering

competitive salaries, and fostering a respectful, inclusive environment. Such reforms would not only make military service more appealing but also align it with the expectations of a changing society.

In conclusion, envisioning South Korea's future should involve a comprehensive strategy, enhancing external defense capabilities against regional threats like North Korea and potential crises in Taiwan, while simultaneously addressing internal challenges, primarily the manpower crisis, through technological integration, cultural reform, and strategic partnerships. This balanced approach is key to building a resilient, adaptable military that can effectively navigate the evolving global landscape.

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