

## Briefing Memo

### **The Impact US-South Korea Missile Defense Cooperation Can Have on Regional Security —Expanding the Role of the Alliance—**

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The alliance between the Republic of Korea (ROK, South Korea) and the United States has not played a direct role in Northeast Asia outside of the Korean Peninsula. The major reason is the stance of the ROK, which worries about effects on its relations with China. This was clearly reflected in the ROK's lack of participation in missile defense. By avoiding official cooperation with the United States in ballistic missile defense, the ROK has adopted a policy of being unclear about its stance as an ally with the United States in its policy toward China. Nevertheless, in a joint statement of the ROK-US Security Consultative Meeting (SCM) in October 2009, it in effect agreed to ROK-US missile defense cooperation. It is not the case that both countries are directly arguing about the alliance's handling of concerns related to China in public discussions, though, as a result of ROK-US cooperation arising from North Korean issues, there can be momentum toward the formation of a role for the alliance in the region centering on China.

#### **Change in attitude of the ROK regarding missile defense from negative to positive**

During the 2000s, South Korea has continued to introduce equipment related to missile defense. In spite of this, the ROK has not announced its participation in the US-led missile defense system. This passive posture of the ROK regarding missile defense is changing.

Vice Minister Chang Soo-man of the ROK's Ministry of National Defense (MND) said in an interview with *the Korea Defense Daily* on October 1, 2009 that even under restricted financial conditions, a sufficient budget has been appropriated in order to cope with the nuclear and missile threats of North Korea. According to the September 29 edition of the same newspaper, this is the reason that a domestically produced destroyer (Korean Destroyer Experimental [KDX] III, an Aegis destroyer) was able to escape budget cuts. In other words, the Ministry of National Defense has justified the introduction of an Aegis ship as a defensive capability in regard to a missile attack. This fact demonstrates that the debate in the ROK surrounding missile defense is very different than it was in the early 2000s. On May 10, 2002 when the KDX-III plan was taking shape, the ROK Navy announced that the purpose of the introduction of an Aegis destroyer was not to cope with missiles. In politics in the ROK at that time, denying an association with missile defense was important in terms of demonstrating the legitimacy of the KDX-III. In contrast to this, the MND currently asserts

the necessity of dealing with missiles as a convincing basis for the KDX-III project. It thus seems that the attitude of the ROK toward missile defense has changed from negative to positive.

What this change shows is not that the MND has become interested in missile defense. Rather, the ROK military originally had an interest in missile defense, and what changed was domestic politics. From the time that the MND was clearly denying missile defense using the KDX-III, it was actually taking actions that could be interpreted as proactive efforts to secure such capabilities. For example, when the MND decided on the introduction of Aegis for the air defense system of the KDX-III, what it requested was that the United States provide SM-2 Block IV, which has been closely connected with the theater ballistic missile defense system. In the end, perhaps in light of the domestic skepticism mentioned above, the MND gave up on the introduction of SM-2 Block IV, and currently SM-2 Block IIIA/B is installed in the KDX-III. Nevertheless, the one time testing of the introduction of the Block IV demonstrates the possibility that the MND has sought opportunities to become involved in missile defense since then.

In fact, after the threat of missiles resulting from the nuclear diplomacy of North Korea came to be strongly recognized in public opinion in South Korea, the MND started to hint at a more proactive stance toward missile defense. Kim Seong-gyu, Director General of the MND Policy Planning Bureau, announced at the National Defense Committee of the National Assembly on June 19, 2003 that the country should possess the capability to deal with the threat of missiles from North Korea. At the same time, Kim also stated that if there is a request from the United States to participate in missile defense, the ROK intends to examine the matter while taking into consideration international trends. In other words, the MND, responding to the increased interest in ROK politics, was clearly no longer denying the possibility of participation in missile defense as it had in the past.

### **Signs of a shift from emphasizing self-reliance to ROK-US cooperation**

The ROK's reluctant stance about cooperation with the US is also being revised. Actually, the MND was emphasizing the idea of building South Korea's self-reliant system, the Korean Missile Defense (KMD), avoiding its official participation in the US-led plans. For example, according to the account of Lee Sanghee, Minister of National Defense, at the National Defense Committee, National Assembly on April 1, 2009, the ROK is promoting the KMD focusing on coping with medium to short-range missiles, and thus has adopted SM-2 instead of SM-3, which has been introduced in the US defense system against long-range missiles. Nevertheless, in a joint statement of the 41st SCM on October 22, 2009, Robert Gates, US Secretary of Defense, affirmed the US commitment to using missile defense capabilities to provide extended deterrence for the ROK. If the ROK military supplements its missile defense capabilities with the information and equipment of the US military, the KMD cannot be said to clearly have the features of an independent system.

Also, the new US missile defense plan, which was announced in September 2009, intends to handle short-range missiles by SM-3, rather than SM-2. In other words, the difference in defense priorities in terms of which types of missiles to focus on defending against will no longer be the consequence of having a clear difference in equipment in order to make a convincing case for the self-reliance of the ROK. According to an explanation by General James Cartwright, the Vice Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, at a press conference on September 17 with Gates, deployment of SM-3 Block IIA, which is being jointly developed by Japan and the United States, and land-based SM-3 will notably strengthen the defense system against medium to short-range missiles. Cartwright also revealed a stance of seeking burden-sharing through the upgrading of systems in allied countries which have Aegis destroyers. It thus seems that it will be necessary for the ROK military, which has KDX-III, to also boost its capabilities through the introduction of a system based on SM-3.

One important factor to allow the US and the ROK to agree on the missile defense cooperation in the 41st SCM, will be South Korean domestic change in favor of it. Prior to the SCM, discussions for the strengthening of missile defense centering on the Grand National Party, the conservative majority in the National Assembly, have been becoming more energized since the North Korean missile problems in April 2009. On April 5, for example, at the National Defense Committee, Kim Dong-sung of the Grand National Party strongly called for full participation in missile defense since Japan, which has introduced the SM-3, has missile interception capabilities, while the ROK system is insufficient. It is likely that the MND sought the provision of missile defense capabilities by the United States at the SCM based on the fact that such discussions had come up in domestic politics.

### **Role of the ROK-US Alliance in Northeast Asia outside of the Korean Peninsula**

The changes to the debate concerning missile defense in the ROK that have been looked at up to now have been directly driven by North Korea issues. Nevertheless, when the ROK deepens its involvement in the missile defense plan of the United States, as an ally of the United States, it will boost its capabilities of dealing not only with North Korea, but also the military strength of China. Indeed, despite the Obama Administration's emphasis on North Korea and Iran's threats rather than China as targets of the new missile defense plan, capabilities to deal with great powers in the new plan can be significantly stronger compared with the existing system. For example, according to the aforementioned press conference with Cartwright, the new plan is aimed at securing technologies to cope with many more targets than the previous missile defense system. In other words, the new plan does not share the presumption of the previous missile defense system that the warheads of enemy countries are limited. As development progresses steadily, the missile defense of the United States will see a notable increase in the ability to handle great powers like China, which have large numbers of warheads.

If the national defense authorities of the ROK and the United States recognize the impact that missile defense will have on security among major countries beyond inter-Korea relations, both countries will likely move forward with the direct role of the alliance in the Northeast Asia region centering on China. In fact, in discussions at the 41st SCM, there was a movement to expand not only missile defense cooperation, but also the role of the ROK-US Alliance from the peninsula to the surrounding region. On October 22, 2009, Gates explained that discussions at the SCM focused not only on North Korea, but also the expanded role that the ROK can play in regional security. While the past SCMs had addressed the ROK contributing to the stability of the region through cooperation on North Korea issues, what Gates explained was regional security divided from North Korea issues. In other words, unlike the former arguments at SCM, the US and the ROK discussed direct cooperation for Northeast Asian security outside of the Korean Peninsula at the 41st SCM.

One good example of the earlier discussions, which virtually define regional security as North Korean issues, was the joint statement of the 39th SCM in November 2007, the last one under South Korea's previous administration of Roh Moo-hyun. In that statement, the existing role of the ROK-US Alliance in regional security is mentioned, but this is handled under the same topic as an extension of security on the Korean Peninsula. The statement says only that US forces stationed in the ROK will "continuously ensure the security of the Korean Peninsula and the stability of Northeast Asia" (Paragraph 5) and that the combined ROK-US defense posture "should be maintained in order to secure peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula and in Northeast Asia" (Paragraph 7). Using such expressions indicating continuation, the statement on security in Northeast Asia mentioned together with the Korean Peninsula is for the most part in parallel with the issue of North Korea. The reason for this is that the existing US forces stationed in the ROK have not been given functions directly related to security in Northeast Asia outside of the Korean Peninsula, and the existing combined ROK-US defense posture is concentrated only on dealing with North Korea. As long as such a situation continues, the direct involvement of the ROK-US Alliance will be limited to the Korean Peninsula and it will contribute to security in Northeast Asia as a result of serving as a deterrent against North Korea. In other words, broadly-defined regional security in which the issue of North Korea is not the independent variable, such as the rapid development of the Chinese military, is outside the scope of the statement of the 39th SCM. The statement of security of Northeast Asia as a problem that depends on the outcome of the issue of North Korea is a feature that has been apparent since earlier.

In contrast to this, the statement of the 41st SCM in 2009 declares that the alliance will contribute to Northeast Asian security as a separate issue from concerns about North Korea. According to the statement, the ROK-US Alliance plays a significant role in fostering peace, stability and prosperity in

the region, and both countries will move forward with multilateral security in the region and globally. This joint statement differs from the previous one in that it does not touch upon North Korea when it mentions regional security. What such a statement implies is that the two allies are seeking cooperation among them related to regional security that is not an extension of the issue of North Korea. Based on the Northeast Asian politics led by the United States and China, matters for concern for regional security aside from North Korea will be centered on China.

The movement to regionally expand the functions of the alliance seems to be initiated by the Lee Myung-bak Administration of South Korea. This is because the first time a similar statement was made was at the 40th SCM in October 2008, which was the first such meeting for the administration. In this statement, the ROK and the United States agreed that the alliance “can play” an important role in fostering regional stability. The fact that the term “plays” rather than “can play” is used in the statement at the 41st SCM the following year, as mentioned above, may show that discussions achieved certain outcomes in defining the regional role of the ROK-US Alliance during the approximately one year between the 40th and 41st SCM. In fact, the Joint Vision for the Alliance of the United States of America and the Republic of Korea on June 16, 2009 states that the alliance will work to promote confidence and transparency in the Asia-Pacific.

## **Conclusion**

Collaboration between the ROK and the United States in missile defense can lead to the ROK's cooperation in its alliance with the United States having an impact on security in regard to China. The ROK and the United States are in the process of demonstrating a posture that involves security issues beyond North Korea threats in the region where China is rapidly rising.

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