

Briefing Memo

The US-ROK Alliance Faces China: South Korea's Missile Defense

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A Shift in the Korea Air Missile Defense

The range of the Korea Air Missile Defense (KAMD), promoted by the Republic of Korea (ROK or South Korea), has been changed to 100 km, and the range capability was first made public in October 2013. Just one year prior, the ROK defense ministry explained that the altitude had been 40km (*Korea Defense Daily*, October 16, 2013 and October 29, 2012). The extension of 60 km is thought to be in response to the interests of the US and China.

The 100 km range falls short of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD), a US system opposed by China, but is enough for the indigenous L-SAM as a substitute to the THAAD. Consistently, the revision appeared four months after the “Future Vision” between the ROK and the People’s Republic of China (PRC), which could be an offset against the precedent commitment of the US and the ROK for regional missile defense, as this paper will explain later. Even though South Korea recently agreed with the US about starting formal consultations for introducing the THAAD operated by the US Forces Korea (USFK), the US ally justifies the position only by insisting that the defense system is not supposed to have significant impact on China’s security.

South Korea’s stance on China has never meant its intention to retreat from the existing alliance because accepting foreign troop’s stationing does not directly lead to mutual defense in region beyond host nation. In article 3 of the ROK-US Mutual Defense Treaty, the mutual defense, which the two nations obviously agreed upon, is against an attack on “territories now under their respective administrative control, or hereafter recognized by one of the Parties as lawfully brought under the administrative control of the other.” The allies have lacked both (1) collective defense arrangement for Northeast Asian security beyond the host nation’s territory like defending allied naval forces from missiles in the high seas and (2) the host nation’s official public allowance of the US military deployment for managing regional threats other than the adversary within the peninsula. However, sustaining the existing deterrence against North Korean attack on South Korean territory increasingly requires the regional function of the alliance due to China’s rise over the past decade.

“The US-ROK alliance must remain adaptable in light of the changing security environment” such as “China’s military modernization” and “we welcome Korea’s adoption of a more regional view of security and stability,” stated Pacific Command Commander William Fallon on March 7, 2006. Given that the US had rarely mentioned China in describing the alliance with South Korea, Fallon’s concern about the rising military

power will be a response to South Korea's avoidance of full support for the "strategic flexibility," which would allow the USFK to operate beyond the peninsula. At the agreement prior to the testimony, the ROK preferred only "global" strategic flexibility, demanding the US to respect "the ROK position that it shall not be involved in a regional conflict in Northeast Asia against the will of the Korean people" (January 19, 2006). While South Korea had sought to distance itself from great power competition in the region, China's rise which concerned Admiral Fallon would require the US-ROK alliance to adopt a greater regional role in order to deter North Korea. How could the alliance assume the Chinese armed forces, which has improved capabilities steadily enough to pose serious concern for the US naval forces, would be exceptionally neutral to arriving US units in the neighboring seas during a Korean war? Should implementing the US-ROK combined operations plan depend on China's will to allow them?

The Defense Cooperation Guidelines with the Regional Scope

As China concretely expressed sharing threat perception with North Korea vis-à-vis the US presence in the peninsula, South Korea started taking a more positive position than in the past regarding regional security cooperation with the US. On May 27, 2008, the PRC Foreign Ministry (FM) defined the US-ROK alliance as "something left over from the history," and claimed that the "Northeast Asia Security Mechanism" as an agenda of the six party talks should sustain the region instead. The concept China described was strikingly consistent with North Korea's insistence to regard the alliance as "a leftover of the Cold War" which should not exist under "a peace regime" in the Korean peninsula, given that a peace regime is an overlapping concept with the security mechanism China advocated in the Joint Statement of the Fourth Round of the Six party Talks (2005). Also, the PRC's open denial of the alliance's *raison d'être* was the first time after its 1970's rapprochement with the US. Even from the viewpoint of China's long-term relations with North Korea, this should be a significant improvement of the alignment between the two nations. About a year later, in the US-ROK "Joint Vision" of 2009, South Korea agreed to a commitment to build an alliance with "regional" scope separated from either "global" issues or "bilateral" affairs regarding North Korea. In contrast to the previous compromise, which virtually limited the strategic flexibility to "global" affairs, the agreed upon regional scope clearly exhibited the alliance's role for the Northeast Asian region beyond the peninsula.

The sharing of threat perception between China and North Korea against the USFK should lead to the "regional" concern that the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA)'s anti-access/area-denial capabilities could hinder the credibility of the US-ROK alliance's deterrence against North Korea. Indeed, the 2010 Ballistic Missile Defense Review (BMDR), which the US was promoting at the time of the Joint Vision, strongly suggested that the ROK was required to manage the missile threats. Regarding both Japan and South Korea as BMD partners in East Asia, the BMDR expected that China's anti-ship ballistic missile capabilities can "target naval forces in the region" and that its missiles would reach not only Taiwan "but also U.S. and allied military installations in the region." In other words, the PLA could threaten the combined operations in the Korean peninsula, the arrival of US forces from outside of Korea and logistical bases like Japan. Almost simultaneously with the BMDR, the first "Guidelines for US-ROK Defense Cooperation" in October 2010 for

advancing the 2009 Vision included the accord to jointly strengthen “capabilities to contribute to regional and global peace and stability, while ensuring a robust combined defense posture to deter aggression on the Korean Peninsula.” The relevance of the capabilities for “regional” security to the BMD was also strongly suggested by the ROK defense minister’s remarks in the same month. Before the National Defense Committee of the National Assembly, the minister expressed an exceptionally-positive stance for BMD cooperation with the US by clarifying that the allies would discuss about sharing information and operating assets for the US regional missile defense (*Korea Defense Daily*, October 25, 2010).

Self-Restraint of Mutual Defense

However, right after the ROK defense minister’s statement about the stronger missile defense coordination with the US, the ministry was required to insist that the KAMD would be still self-reliant from the US system regardless of information sharing. Such a domestic demand for autonomy would lead to the overlap between South Korea’s visions with the US and China. Like the US-ROK Joint Vision in 2009, the PRC-ROK Future Vision later in 2013 also expressed the cooperation with “bilateral,” “regional” and “global” scope. If the US-ROK “regional” cooperation were for managing China’s missile threats, South Korea’s “regional” alignment with China could become an offset to the former.

The following strongly supports such a scenario: Firstly, the range of the KAMD was revised only after the Future Vision with the PRC, as this paper already explained. It was the same day of the revision when the ROK defense minister firstly published that the nation would introduce the indigenous L-SAM, denying the longer range THAAD (*Korea Defense Daily*, October 17, 2013). The fact that the ROK Defense Acquisition Program Administration (DAPA) requested the US to provide the information about the THAAD as a “similar” system with the L-SAM exhibited that the indigenous equipment was a substitute to the US missile defense system (The DAPA, Written Answer, National Assembly National Defense Committee, 326th session, July 7, 2014, p.25). Secondly, at the National Assembly on October 22, the same month of the decision on the KAMD range, the Chairman of the Joint Chief of Staff (JCS) Choi Yoon Hee withdrew his previous support for equipping South Korea’s Aegis destroyers with SM-3s, which would also expand the range of the KAMD. Lastly, the 2014 ROK defense white paper published the chart of KAMD, in which L-SAM intercepts missile at only “lower tier” of a terminal phase and Aegis destroyer exists without launching any missile. The range, which leaves a midcourse and “upper tier” terminal phase out of the KAMD, allows the missile defense program to focus on its objective “to intercept missiles heading towards the ROK territory” (*2014 Defense White Paper*, p.62).

The new KAMD range almost confirmed the self-restraint of collective defense to keep the ROK away from involving interception of a missile that might be on its way to the US, logistical bases in a regional partner or allied naval forces in the neighboring high seas. Yet, it was hard to say that South Koreans assessed that the PLA could never pose direct threats to their nation; there was no serious debate about whether that could be the case. This is not necessarily a unique attitude of regional ally. In the early 1980s, South Korea, which defined itself as a frontline nation of the cold war, criticized Japan for avoiding the burden of securing

the region from communist threats. At that time, Japan also rarely held public discussion about whether the threats in Northeast Asia would cause serious concerns for Japan's security. South Korea's current self-restraint of collective defense can be better explained by such an unconscious public tendency toward buck-passing of regional threats to others, rather than the military's strategic choice, because the PRC-ROK vision, followed by the restraint, was not a result of improving confidence between the two militaries. Weeks before the vision, the PRC virtually refused the "joint press statement" proposed by the ROK JCS Chairman at his visit to China. While South Korea insisted it was published (*Korea Defense Daily*, June 7, 2013), Chinese media like the *PLA Daily* or *Xinhua* never mentioned such a document. Even the South Korean government did not open the full text of the "press" statement. Regardless of the military's failure in building confidence, the South Korean government soon praised the achievement of the vision "for making substantial progress in the ROK-China strategic cooperative partnership based on confidence" without facing strong skepticism in public.

Nor have most South Koreans concretely discussed whether China became more positive about South Korea-led unification of the peninsula in recent years, despite the fact that such an expectation for China's geo-political shift has given a strong reason for many in South Korea to avoid clearly supporting the US regional strategy. Even during the incumbent Park Geun-hye administration, which emphasizes "strategic cooperative partnership" with China, the PRC has maintained consistency in backing "independent" unification before South Korea's senior officials; the "independent" unification is a North Korean concept which denies any unification dominated by a multi-party democratic regime like South Korea, which obeys the US will according to the North's ideology. In the vision with South Korea, China did avoid directly citing "independent" unification. Instead, it virtually expressed the same concept by more concretely supporting the unification as the achievement of "Korean people's desire" resulting from improvement of the North-South relations. This meaning was more clearly explained by PRC President Xi Jinping's support for the "independent peaceful reunification" at that time's summit meeting with President Park (PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "President Xi Jinping: Comprehensively Promote Mutually Beneficial Cooperation Push Forward China-ROK Relations for Greater Development," June 27, 2013).

Strategic Partnership in the Region

It was following the Cheonan incident in 2010 when the largest number of South Koreans perceived competing interests with China in national security. At that time, the PRC FM, probably reflecting the then-PLA Deputy Chief's position, defined the alliance's joint maritime exercise for deterring the North's provocations as a violation of "China's security interests" (*NIDS China Security Report 2012*, p.29). Since then, South Korea has made efforts to let China's priority shift away from alignment with North Korea to the "strategic" partnership with the ROK. However, the ROK defense authority would have never seen significant chance to realize the hope from the beginning; the first meeting of defense ministers between China and South Korea after the Cheonan incident. The joint press statement of the meeting on July 15, 2011, indeed had the different texts in Korean and Chinese. While the Korean text said that the two nations agreed in opposing "any

action which will do harm to peace and security of the Korean Peninsula” like “provocation,” a term widely used by South Koreans for describing North Korea’s local military attacks, Chinese statement omitted “provocation” (*Xinhua*, July 15, 2011 and *Korea Defense Daily*, July 18, 2011). Without “provocation,” the statement was almost the same with China’s laying the blame on the South’s military exercise after the North’s shelling of South Korean island, Yeonpyeong, also in 2010 (PRC FM Spokesperson on December 16, 2010).

The “strategic cooperative partnership” with China has never provided enough confidence for the ROK military to assume the PLA would not hinder the US-ROK combined operations against North Korea. In this regard, South Korea’s recent agreement with the US for launching discussions about the THAAD deployment is its more positive sign for allowing the US forces to manage broader regional security. This prospect of the alliance’s development could be the reason why the PRC prioritized transition from armistice to peace in the Korean peninsula, accusing the THAAD of undermining “China’s strategic security interests” (PRC FM Spokesperson on February 17, 2016). As this paper exhibited, China shared the concept of a peace regime to be transferred from the armistice regime with North Korea in order to deny the US-ROK alliance’s legitimacy, referring the six party talks. The rising great power has been highly conscious about the US-ROK alliance’s functions and politics during this decade, probably even in the six party talks for stopping North Korea’s nuclear program. Under the situation where the US and South Korea face North Korea’s emerging nuclear and missile capabilities, the allies will also be required to consider their future regional roles.

(Completed on March 10, 2016)

*This paper is based on the following articles written by the author in Japanese.

- "Redefinition of Asymmetric Alliance in Bipolar World: The Role of the Republic of Korea-United States Alliance in Great Power Politics," *Journal of Law* (Keio University), Vol. 83, No.12, (December 2010).
- “Impacts of China-North Korea Alignment on Politics of the Korean Peninsula,” *Toa* (East Asia), No.530 (August 2011).
- “Narrowing Range of South Korea's Policy Options toward China,” *Journal of International Security*, Vol. 39 No. 2 (September 2011).
- "The Reason Why China-South Korea Rapprochement Falls Short of Honeymoon," *WEDGE*, Vol. 27, No. 7, (July 2015).

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