

# REPUBLIC OF KOREA

## THE SECURITY ENVIRONMENT

The immediate security environment of the Republic of Korea (ROK) comprises two principal arenas: the broader arena of Northeast Asia, and the more specific arena of the Korean peninsula. Although tensions have declined in the broader arena, they remain high along the demilitarized zone where there are real and constant dangers of renewed armed conflict, accentuated by the North Korean submarine infiltration incident in September 1996. Sizable forces are arrayed on both sides—over one million troops in the North and 650,000 in the South—with no prospect in sight for reductions of arms control. Despite some improvement in the early 1990s, inter-Korean relations are at a low point. North Korea continues to pose the greatest and most immediate threat to South Korean security and dominates South Korean threat perceptions.

**The North Korean Threat.** Today, three dimensions of the North Korean threat may be discerned: North Korea's continued military efforts; its diplomatic efforts to create misunderstandings, or drive a wedge, in relations between Seoul and Washington; and its uncertain political future.

With respect to the military threat, the North's basic objective remains to unify the Korean peninsula under Pyongyang's control. It continues to give priority attention to its military rather than its deteriorating economy (see Table 1). In addition, North Korea is capable of building missiles and is exporting modified Scuds to the Middle East. Many South Koreans believe the North still desires nuclear weapons, despite the current agreement with the United States to forego them. North Korea also has the third largest stockpile of biochemical weapons in the world. Its tactics of subversion—ranging from infiltration to the subtle utilization of diplomatic gestures—give South Koreans no cause to lessen concern.

The establishment of the Korean Energy Development Organization (KEDO), following the October 1994 Geneva Agreed Framework between the United States and North Korea, was greeted in South Korea with ambivalence. North Korea finally had promised to seal off its nuclear reactors, to remain in the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) regime, and to allow the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to inspect its nuclear facilities. In return, the United States promised to help provide North Korea with two nuclear power plants and improve its relations with Pyongyang. The agreement provided a solution to the North Korean nuclear proliferation problem, much to the relief of the South.

However, the prospects for Pyongyang's implementation of the agreement remain far from certain. Following the agreement, tensions once again increased when Pyongyang initially refused to accept the South Korean model reactor. Although the Agreed Framework has so far worked better than expected, South Koreans expect that similar controversies will continue to arise periodically.

The nuclear weapons negotiation also highlighted the second dimension of the North Korean threat—that the North would use its newly established direct contacts with the United States to drive a wedge between South Korea and its most important ally. Since the conclusion of the Agreed Framework, Pyongyang has pursued a multi-faceted strategy aimed at creating the perception of an isolated, ineffective South Korean administration. Its strategy has included a refusal to negotiate with Seoul and increased pressure on the United States to agree to bilateral U.S.-North Korea military talks, with frequent demands for a bilateral peace agreement with the United States to replace the current armistice agreement. Many South Koreans believe North Korea's ultimate objective is to create tension in the ROK-U.S. alliance, thereby forcing U.S. troops out of the South. Similarly, the North has pressured Japan to curtail consultations with the South.

Pyongyang unilaterally undermined the armistice regime by withdrawing its delegation from the Military Armistice Commission (MAC)—forcing the Chinese delegation to recall its delegation from the same commission—and by expelling Polish members of the Neutral Nations Supervisory Commission (NNSC) from North Korean soil. As a result of this series of unilateral and potentially dangerous moves by Pyongyang, the future of the armistice regime—the central instrument in maintaining peace on the Korean peninsula since the end of the Korean War—is in question. In April 1996, South Korea and the United States proposed four party talks (North and South Korea, China, and the United States) to discuss a permanent peace arrangement, but the North Korean government has not readily accepted this approach.

A third source of threat comes from the uncertainty regarding the future of the North Korean regime and inter-Korean relations following the July 1994 death of Kim Il Sung, the North Korean leader. South Korean analysts have explored three possible leadership succession scenarios: (1) a transitional regime under his son Kim Jong-Il; (2) a reformist military-technocrat coalition; and (3) violent collapse. Under the first scenario, only limited engagement between North Korea and its neighbors, including the South, is expected. Should the second eventually occur, Pyongyang could fully engage and expand relations with its neighbors. There are variants of the collapse scenario—but all three scenarios entail destabilizing political, economic, and social developments, such

as violent clashes within the North, military incidents by rogue forces, large-scale refugee movements, and an economic implosion.

In the event of a collapse, South Korea's deterrence policy against the North would be least effective because of fragmentation of control in the North. Moreover, a collapse would involve other countries around Korea readjusting their policies in the face of initial instability and an almost inevitable reunification. Although it is extremely difficult to make predictions, the South Korean government has been studying carefully such scenarios and their possible implications. Reports of economic desperation in the North and an increasing number of defections have given increased credibility to scenarios involving collapse or heightened internal tensions in the North.

**Northeast Asia.** Aside from concerns over North Korea, there has been an overall improvement in the international politics of the broader Northeast Asia arena. The preoccupation of most countries with accelerating economic development has encouraged cooperative commercial relations among countries in the region, including those that previously had been on opposite Cold War sides. As a result, trade among Northeast Asian countries has increased significantly in recent years, and interdependence is deepening. This is particularly marked in South Korea's economic relationship with China.

Nevertheless, South Koreans are concerned that the present trends may prove short lived. The reemergence of territorial disputes and the continuing tension across the Taiwan Strait (not to speak of the Korean situation) demonstrate the fragility of political-security relations in the region. From a South Korean perspective, a more fundamental cause for concern comes from shifts in distribution of power among regional states. For a combination of economic and geopolitical reasons, power relationships in Northeast Asia have changed very rapidly in recent years. This change leads to uncertainty, and uncertainty can increase the odds of misperception, miscalculation and conflict.

In this context, the active military build up in many Northeast Asian countries is a source of concern. The competitive acquisition of arms is being fueled by the obsolescence of existing weapons stocks and the general state of economic prosperity throughout the region. Above all, however, it has been stimulated by the strategic uncertainties surrounding the collapse of the Soviet Union and the reduction in American deployments in the region. In this regard, many South Koreans consider that the continued commitment of the United States to the region is essential in maintaining stability in the years to come.

Another serious challenge to the long-term security of the broader region is likely to come from internal factors affecting the international behavior of the

countries in the region. Major transformations—social, economic and political in nature—are taking place in key states in the region. The outcome of these transformations will determine to a large extent the nature of these countries' interaction with other nations and the future Northeast Asian security environment.

There is also a growing agenda of nonconventional security issues in the region—issues that do not involve direct military deployments, but which could give rise to the threat or use of force. These include the management of natural resources, the protection of the environment—transborder air pollution and the dumping of nuclear waste in particular—the handling of refugee movements, and the prevention of international criminal activities such as piracy, smuggling, drug trafficking and terrorism.

## **DEFENSE POLICIES AND ISSUES**

**Defense Objectives.** The government of the Republic of Korea has defined its national goals as the assurance of independence, the achievement of social welfare, and the promotion of international standing and contribution to world peace. To achieve these goals, the Ministry of National Defense (MND) has the following national defense objectives: (1) defend the nation against external military threat and aggression; (2) support peaceful reunification of the nation; and (3) contribute to regional stability and world peace.

Given the continuing threat posed by North Korea, the ROK's primary defense objective is to deter the North from launching any military aggression. The ROK puts a high priority upon deterrence as opposed to waging all-out war. To deter conflict, the ROK has assumed a total defense posture integrating all necessary and available means and efforts. It also has maintained a solid defense alliance with the United States since the Korean War, primarily for the purpose of deterring North Korea. Many Koreans believe that even after Korean unity is restored, this defense alliance will continue to be necessary, possibly to deter Korea's neighbors.

The South Korean government also has pursued diplomatic means for preventing war in the belief that political reconciliation and economic interdependence among regional countries would contribute to easing tension and building confidence on the Korean peninsula. The centerpiece of the ROK's earlier diplomatic effort was its vigorous pursuit of its so-called "Nordpolitik," or Northern Policy. This approach culminated in the normalization of relations with the then-Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China. The Kim Young Sam Administration expanded on the earlier advances through its "Globalization" Strategy.

While deterring war is far better than having to defend against attack, the ROK also has had to prepare itself for the possibility that deterrence will fail and war will break out. Having suffered not only from inter-Korean confrontation, but also from continuous invasions in the past, the ROK has adopted an "Offensive-Defensive" strategy, or so-called "Never-Again" strategic attitude, toward both its northern half and neighboring countries in the region. The offensive-defensive posture would employ limited offensive military operations, such as preemptive strikes against enemy concentrations, if and when it is determined that an enemy is ready to embark on immediate offensive attacks on the ROK. It should be noted, however, that preemptive strikes are different from a preventive war waged against a potential adversary likely to launch military attacks if given enough time to arm. The ROK's offensive-defensive posture does not embrace the preventive war concept, but does accept the concept of preemptive strikes for defensive purposes only.

**Defense Spending and Military Personnel.** The ROK's "Never-Again" strategy requires military strength and solid structure. Seoul believes that for the purpose of defense, the ROK needs 1–1.5 percent of its population for standing troops and has to allocate 3–4 percent of its total GNP for defense purposes. Currently, the ROK maintains more than 650,000 troops (1.5 percent of its population) and allocates 3.7 percent of its GNP for defense.

The ROK maintains relatively large ground forces mainly because the North has an even larger ground force. More than 85 percent of the total number of troops belonging to North and South Korea are ground forces. In contrast, air and naval personnel make up only 4 and 7 percent, respectively, of the two sides' manpower. Once Korea is reunified, it may face entirely different kinds of threats from neighboring countries outside the Korean peninsula and may need to augment naval and air forces, as well as some strategic elements to meet these potential contingencies.

**Defense Equipment and Procurement.** In recent years, the ROK has upgraded its military preparedness to increase its self-reliance in the face of military contingencies. This was undertaken in the belief that self-reliance is needed to protect its own people and to make outside help more meaningful.

To enhance a self-reliant defense, the ROK has made strenuous efforts to bridge the military gap with the North. The ROK Army introduced Korean-made tanks and is planning to produce new models of helicopters and to modernize night-vision equipment and mobility-support equipment. It plans to replace the existing 155 mm howitzer with self-propelled guns and to computerize fire control systems in order to shorten response time. The army also has put major

facilities underground in order to enhance survivability at the beginning of a war. The ROK Navy has developed combat vessels—destroyers, escort ships and patrol boats—and has introduced anti-submarine aircraft and submarines. The ROK Air Force is proceeding with the Korean Fighter Program to match the North's MiG-23 and MiG-29 fighters. After completing these programs, the government believes it will be in position to defend South Korea from the North Korean threat alone if need be, as well as having the capability to cope with a certain level of possible threat from other neighbors.

Being situated where the interests of four major powers traditionally intersect, Korea's ultimate security dilemma lies in its relative lack of physical resources compared to these powers. No matter how militarily-strong Korea becomes, its neighbors are just too big for Korea to be able to purchase political independence through military strength. In the long term, Korea needs: (1) a military capacity substantial enough to discourage all potential adversaries from venturing aggression; and (2) a diplomacy that protects its continued autonomy, so that no one will be tempted into preemptive aggression against Korea. To cope with threats beyond its control, Korea particularly needs security arrangements that will survive changing circumstances in the future.

## **CONTRIBUTIONS TO REGIONAL AND GLOBAL SECURITY**

Seoul's willingness to contribute to regional stability and global peace is an important component of its defense objectives. This approach is well reflected in South Korea's recent moves to promote friendly relations with neighboring countries, strengthen regional dialogue activities, and participate actively in the peacekeeping activities of the United Nations.

**Regional Security Cooperation.** The idea of establishing multilateral mechanisms to manage security problems and address other emerging concerns in East Asia is now receiving wider support among many of the nations in the region. The ROK was one of the earliest proponents for establishing a regional cooperative security regime. In 1988, South Korea proposed the Northeast Asian Consultative Mechanism, whereby six countries in Northeast Asia would consult on issues of mutual concern. Now, a multilateral security dialogue encompassing the entire Asia Pacific region has begun with the launching of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). The ROK supports the ARF as a region-wide security forum and is actively engaged in the ARF process.

The Asia Pacific region, however, consists of several subregions with different security equations. Northeast Asia is the most critical of these because of its volatility and the sheer magnitude of the population and economic resources

concentrated there. Recognizing this, the ROK seeks to establish a Northeast Asia Security Dialogue, although the government has adopted a gradual approach, taking into account historic realities as well as differences in the political systems and economic development among regional countries. The government believes that regional security cooperation should initially place its main emphasis on preventive diplomacy, conflict prevention and confidence-building.

**Participation in UN Peacekeeping Operations.** Although joining the United Nations only in 1991, the ROK is participating actively in UN activities, including those related to peace and security. Its first contribution came in July 1993, when the ROK dispatched a military construction unit—the 250 person Evergreen Unit—to Somalia. The unit mainly engaged in road repair work assigned by UNODSOM II Headquarters and successfully completed its mission. In June 1994, the Ministry of National Defense sent a forty-two person armed forces medical service unit to MINURSO in Western Sahara at the request of the United Nations. In addition, the MND sent ten military observers to the UNOMIG in Georgia and two military observers to the UNMGIP in Kashmir. The MND also has responded positively to UN efforts to launch a standby peacekeeping arrangement by notifying the UN of its available resources.

Because the Korean peninsula itself remains one of the world's most dangerous spots, concerns were expressed initially in Seoul about the decision to dispatch troops abroad, regardless how small the numbers might be. However, the government of the ROK believes that a stronger UN will be conducive to creating and maintaining a stable international environment that would serve the national interests of South Korea. Public opinion in the ROK widely supports this view.

**Table 1.**  
**Military Capability of South and North Korea (as of 1996)**

CLASSIFICATION	SOUTH KOREA	NORTH KOREA
<b>TROOPS</b>		
Army	560,000	920,000
Navy	66,000	47,000
Air Force	64,000	88,000
Total	690,000 <sup>a</sup>	1,055,000 <sup>b</sup>
<b>GROUND FORCE</b>		
<b>Unit</b>		
Corps	11	20
Divisions	50 <sup>c</sup>	54
Brigades	21	99
<b>Equipment</b>		
Tanks	2,050	3,800
Armored vehicles	2,250	2,800
Field artillery	4,700	11,000
<b>NAVAL FORCE</b>		
Force combatants	180	434
Support vessels	50	335
Submarines	4	35
<b>AIR FORCE</b>		
Tactical aircraft	530	840
Support aircraft	160	510
Helicopters	630	290

**NOTES:**

- a. Excluding those enlisted for defense call-up, and including Marine Corps troops within the Navy.*  
*b. The Marine Corps troops who are organized into the Army are included in the Army.*  
*c. Including Marine Corps divisions.*

Source: Defense White Paper 1996-1997



**Table 2.****Proportion of Defense Outlay in the Government Budget by Fiscal Year**

1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996
28.7%	26.3%	25.2%	24.2%	23.0%	22.0%

*Based on finalized budget.*

**Growth Rates of Government Budget and Defense Budget of Fiscal Year**

Classification	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996
Growth rates of government budget (%)	18.9	23.1	14.6	13.7	15.6	16.0
Growth rates of defense budget (%)	12.3	12.9	9.6	9.3	9.9	10.6

*Based on finalized budget.*

**Comparison of GNP by Fiscal Year/Government Budget to Proportion of Defense Budget**

Classification	1980	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996
Comparison against GNP (%)	6.0	4.0	3.6	3.5	3.5	3.3	3.1
Comparison against government budget (%)	35.9	27.6	25.1	24.2	23.3	22.2	21.1

*Based on finalized budget.*

**Composition of Defense Budget in Fiscal Year (%)**

Classification	1980	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996
Total defense budget	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
Military capability maintenance cost	39.0	34.8	33.0	31.6	30.2	29.1	28.3
Operation of military force cost	36.1	42.4	44.1	45.0	45.7	45.6	47.0
Equipment maintenance cost	11.4	9.6	9.6	9.4	9.3	9.8	9.7
Barrack maintenance cost, etc.	13.5	13.2	13.3	14.0	14.8	15.5	15.0