

Militarizing South Korea

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With the presidential election in South Korea just two months away, efforts are underway to lock into place a policy of confrontation with that nation's neighbor to the north. When current South Korean President Lee Myung-bak took office five years ago, he wasted little time in undoing the rapprochement that had been painstakingly built up during his predecessor's term. All of the leading candidates in this year's presidential race, including even Park Geun-hye of the conservative Grand National Party, hold more moderate positions on relations with North Korea than does President Lee. Neither Lee nor U.S. President Obama are keen on the prospect of warming relations between the two Koreas, and they are making every effort to forestall such an eventuality in the little time that remains in Lee's term.

Under provisions of the Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR), an international treaty involving 34 nations, South Korea was committed to limiting its ballistic missiles to a range of no more than 300 kilometers and capping payload at 500 kilograms. The Lee Administration chafed under those restrictions and long sought their removal. This month he met with success, reaching a deal with the U.S. that allows South Korea to exceed the treaty's limits. The new agreement allows South Korea to develop ballistic missiles ranging up to 800 kilometers, sufficient to cover all of North Korea and sections of China and Russia. The payload limit remains at 500 kilograms, but only for missiles at the maximum allowable range. (1)

As South Korea sees it, any missile having a range lower than 550 kilometers can carry up to 1,000 kilograms of explosives. "We can say that there's no payload limit actually, because if we launch a missile from the central region of the country, all of North Korean territory is under the 550-kilometer striking range," observes Major General Shin Won-sik of the South Korean Ministry of National Defense. (2)

Under 300 kilograms, and a missile is now permitted to house a warhead weighing up to two tons, and Shin points out that most of North Korea's primary targets lie within that distance of the border. Restraints apply only to deployment, Shin argues, so research may proceed on missiles that surpass the new limits, including the production of prototypes. (3)

The Lee Administration wants to move forward without delay on the deployment of the new missiles, and has asked the legislature to allocate \$2.2 billion towards a long range ballistic missile program. Those missiles are expected to be in place by 2017. (4)

It appears that in tradeoff for allowing South Korea a special exemption under the MTCR, the U.S. expects South Korea to coordinate its efforts with U.S. missile defense plans. According to Kathleen Hicks, U.S. Principal Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, there are "a lot of ways" that South Korea could assist U.S. missile defense in Northeast Asia. "We do

have a dialogue with the Koreans about how to contribute to missile defense,” she says. (5)

The Korean Air and Missile Defense System (KAMD) is scheduled to be fully deployed by 2015. Ostensibly intended to serve only as South Korea’s defense against attack by the North, it is interesting to note how well the system could mesh with that of the U.S. missile defense system. The KAMD, consisting of radar, U.S.-built Patriot PAC-2 missiles, and Aegis destroyers armed with sea-to-air missiles purchased from the U.S., is ideally suited for interoperability with the U.S. system.

This past June, the U.S. and South Korea reached agreement on a “comprehensive alliance approach” to defense, involving both modification of the MTCR and implementation of a missile defense system. According to a South Korean government official, “It means building a South Korea-led missile defense system against North Korean missile attacks, with the U.S. providing intelligence and detection support.” (6) But U.S.-South Korean integration can cut both ways, and it is difficult to envision the KAMD remaining uninvolved in the U.S. missile defense system. A former South Korean foreign affairs/security official feels that the process of South Korea’s incorporation into the U.S. system could already be underway. “I think there needs to be a concrete explanation on this idea of it not being missile defense participation,” he said. (7)

The Obama Administration is engaging in a major expansion of its missile defense system in Asia, including the construction of additional radars in Japan and the Philippines. American upgrades to Japanese weaponry are also taking place. “The focus of our rhetoric is North Korea,” explains Steven Hildreth, a U.S. expert in missile defense technology and policy. “The reality is that we’re also looking longer term at the elephant in the room, which is China.” Hildreth claims the U.S. is laying the foundations for an Asian missile defense system with nations such as Japan, South Korea and Australia. (8)

An essential component of those plans is an upgrade in technology, including Aegis systems aboard Japanese destroyers. Nick Bucci, head of maritime programs at Lockheed Martin, said he is “pretty sure” that South Korea has been talking with the U.S. Navy about similar upgrades to its Aegis destroyers. (9)

Unnamed sources revealed that the U.S. and South Korea have recently developed a strategic plan for targeting North Korea. The specific scenarios that would trigger the plan into action are not publicly known. The attack would be implemented in five phases, including the launch of the long range ballistic missiles that South Korea intends to soon develop. This would be followed by sending waves of cruise missiles flying into North Korea, and then fighter planes and bombers would pound North Korea’s nuclear facilities. Drones would eliminate moving targets, relying on U.S. intelligence and communication systems. The plan is to be discussed in further detail at next week’s Security Consultative Meeting between the U.S. and South Korea. (10)

The Lee Administration has further tied South Korea to Western military policy by its recent signing onto NATO’s Partnership Cooperation Program. According to a NATO statement, South Korea is “already a valuable contributor” to NATO operations in Afghanistan, and its role in the partnership program will “promote political dialogue and practical cooperation” in several areas, including “multinational peace support” – a euphemistic phrase that it would be more accurate to call “war and military occupation.” (11)

The growing militarization of the Korean Peninsula continues apace. U.S. armed forces in South Korea will soon be supplied with precision-guided artillery shells, which have an almost vertical trajectory ideal for targeting North Korean artillery batteries situated behind mountains. By the end of this year, the U.S. will also install additional Patriot PAC-3 missiles and ATACMS surface-to-surface missiles. (12) The U.S. is also returning a chemical warfare battalion to South Korea, nine years after it had been withdrawn. (13) South Korea is seeking to purchase from the U.S. 36 Apache attack helicopters at a price tag of \$3.6 billion, and in a separate deal 36 Cobra attack helicopters, at a cost of \$2.6 billion. Included in the deals are associated components, as well as missiles and rockets. (14)

South Korea is also in the incipient stage of producing kamikaze drones, which are expected to become operational by 2015. The recently signed modification to the MTCR agreement allows South Korea to arm drones with warheads weighing more than two tons. (15)

The Obama Administration has steadfastly eschewed any talks with North Korea, and appears bent on a policy of further isolating that nation and raising tensions in a potentially volatile area of the world. South Korean President Lee Myung-bak, similarly averse to dialogue, wants to present his successor in office with a *fait accompli*, ensuring that there is no alternative but to continue his policy of confrontation.

According to a South Korean general, the lifting of missile restrictions on South Korea enables its military to respond to North Korea with more “flexibility.” That can only mean a greater likelihood of the use of weaponry and in a wider array of situations. The belief that military force on the Korean Peninsula can be carefully calibrated to produce a desired and precise result without risking a wider conflagration is not only reckless but delusional. North Korea’s own militarization is driven to a large extent by its feelings of being threatened, and the recent moves by the U.S. and South Korea are only going to feed that perception – a not inaccurate one.

Furthermore, there is every indication that South Korea is likely to become increasingly integrated into the U.S. missile defense system in Northeast Asia, exposing it to the risk of being drawn into any conflict that may arise between the U.S. and China or Russia. Much depends on the extent that the next South Korean president is willing or able to undo the damage of these recent moves, and to instead focus on dialogue with North Korea and pursue an independent policy that puts the Korean people first.

Gregory Elich is on the Board of Directors of the Jasenovac Research Institute and on the Advisory Board of the Korea Truth Commission. He is the author of the book Strange Liberators: Militarism, Mayhem, and the Pursuit of Profit.

<http://www.amazon.com/Strange-Liberators-Militarism-Mayhem-Pursuit/dp/1595265708>

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