

## Understanding Security Relations on the Korean Peninsula: South Korea's Strategic Perceptions on the Region and Beyond

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This product presents a summary of an interview.

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On April 23, 2010, representatives from the Army Directed Studies Office (ADSO) of the United States Department of Defense visited the East Asia Institute (EAI) for an informal interview on South Korea's strategic view toward the region. This brief interview was a great opportunity to bring together South Korean experts and American military officers for a greater understanding of security relations on the Korean Peninsula and the role South Korea plays in the East Asian region. A wide range of current issues were covered in the interview ranging from the major security concerns facing South Korea, transfer of War-time Operational Control (OPCON), the unification of the two Koreas to the recent sinking of a South Korean warship and its security implications for South Korea and the United States. The following is part of the interview by the ADSO on these topics.

### Major Security Concerns of South Korea

***Is there something that the U.S. military is doing that maybe is not in the best interests of South Korea's security? What would be the major security issues or concerns facing the Lee Myung-bak administration of South Korea?***

**PROFESSOR CHAESUNG CHUN:** The sinking of a South Korean warship *Cheonan* on March 26, 2010 raised new issues surrounding the U.S.-ROK alliance, particularly the discus-

sions on the transfer of OPCON initially scheduled for 2012. The *Cheonan* incident fundamentally brought into question South Korea's military preparedness to unexpected external threats. This skepticism has increasingly strengthened the view that the South Korean military is not ready to assume OPCON given the rising concerns of North Korea.

At the regional level, East Asian nationalism is an important factor that greatly influences bilateral or trilateral relations among countries in Northeast Asia. South Korea has been closely linked to China for more than two thousand years as a junior partner. I am not very sure about the future order in East Asia with China as a regional hegemon, but I am hoping that it will be more multilateral and cooperative with the United States as a stabilizer. In this regard, South Korea will want the United States to keep its role as an offshore balancer in East Asia. However, China might be skeptical of the continued presence of the United States in the region arguing that this is an outdated remnant of the Cold War.

Although South Korea and Japan have maintained a relatively good bilateral relationship, nationalistic-oriented problems might hinder their strategic efforts to further increase the level of cooperation. Even younger generations became very nationalistic when it comes to territorial disputes or historical issues between the two countries. Thus, nationalism represents another big concern for

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South Korea-Japan relations.

The South Korean government is also undergoing a strategic effort to broaden its military range beyond Asia. Through this effort, Seoul is seeking to assume global responsibility as a middle power. The question of how to go global based on common interests with the United States remains the core issue. Both Seoul and Washington are trying to address non-military problems, including human security issues, within the framework of their bilateral alliance. Similarly, both South Korea and the United States share interests to expand the scope of the alliance to incorporate non-traditional security challenges such as drug-trafficking and the environment.

### **Transfer of OPCON**

***There has been an opinion that we have to push back the planned OPCON transfer date in 2012. Is it strictly from the military desire or from the government policymakers? Is it a unified view in South Korea?***

PROFESSOR CHAESUNG CHUN: The transfer of OPCON will make South Korea more independent in the decision-making process when dealing with the North Korean regime as a sovereign state. Although the Lee administration does not speak openly about pursuing policy independence from the United States, President Lee Myung-bak wants to increase military spending to develop future capabilities. The decreasing birth rate in South Korea, however, will create problems for military recruitment in the coming years. Thus, what we need is a careful review of the issues surrounding the transfer of OPCON. As the Lee administration has been involved in so many other policy initiatives since he took

office in February 2008, policy discussions regarding the OPCON transfer will continue to dominate his national agenda probably until the end of his term.

PRESIDENT SOOK-JONG LEE: There is a divided opinion on OPCON transfer in South Korea, particularly among politicians. The ruling party of the previous government and left-wing nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) tend to oppose the view that we have to delay the OPCON transfer date. However, after the sinking of the *Cheonan*, public opinion began to shift toward the conservative view that Seoul is not ready to take on OPCON yet. If we find sufficient evidence to blame North Korea for the *Cheonan* incident, the issues of the OPCON transfer will become even more salient.

***Was the OPCON transfer originally pushed by the United States or by the South Korean side?***

PRESIDENT SOOK-JONG LEE: The original proposal was initiated by South Korea based on the shared psychological perception among South Koreans that it was time for the South Korean government to take Wartime Operational Control as a sovereign state. The previous Roh administration was particularly sensitive to this sovereignty issue in relation to OPCON. At the same time, the U.S. government took advantage of this new idea of the OPCON transfer. Particularly, former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld wanted to make the U.S. forces stationed overseas more flexible. The different interests of South Korea and the United States generated the OPCON transfer plan targeting for 2012. I am personally not sure if this decision was carefully calculated from the military perspective, but it

was miscalculated politically.

### **The Cheonan Incident and North Korea**

***From the U.S. media, it has been reported that the sinking was most likely an accident caused by old sea mines. However, South Koreans seem to view this incident as intentionally caused by North Korea. If the sinking of a South Korean warship was deliberately targeted by North Korea, is this likely to cause a severe rupture in inter-Korean relations? Do you think this incident can possibly have greater implications for South Korean security or do you think this incident will eventually go sideways in South-North relations on the Korean Peninsula?***

PRESIDENT SOOK-JONG LEE: It is going to cause a severe rupture in inter-Korean relations. Although we had several skirmishes near the disputed western sea border with North Korea in the past, the *Cheonan* incident is completely a different story. Previous skirmishes were open seafire, but this incident was a secretive aggressive attack that led to the deaths of forty-six South Korean sailors. We see this incident as a kind of terrorism. It will take more investigation to determine who and what might have caused the sinking. The South Korean government is now in a very difficult position to push for the resumption of the Six-Party Talks given the rapidly deteriorating inter-Korean relations and rising concerns against North Korea.

***Is it in North Korea's interests to attack a South Korean warship in the current situation considering Pyongyang's crippling economy and international image?***

PRESIDENT SOOK-JONG LEE: If you try to understand North Korea rationally, you cannot understand its behavior. The two Koreas had initiated informal talks to promote summit meetings for the past few months before the sinking of the warship. I think President Lee Myung-bak was very surprised at the *Cheonan* incident considering the enormous political investment put into a South-North summit meeting prior to the sinking of the *Cheonan*. Many experts assume that the domestic problems of North Korea, which include consolidating succession issues and domestic solidarity, might have led to this recent provocation. In addition, the Obama administration turned out to be even tougher than the Bush administration on nuclear proliferation increasing economic and diplomatic pressures on North Korea.

***North Korea seems to understand the U.S. pressure points very well. How do Kim Jong-il and his advisors view the world? They keep the world reacting to them rather than reacting to the rest of the world.***

PRESIDENT SOOK-JONG LEE: North Korea frames issues at hand very well using the tactics of nuclear brinkmanship. We cannot prevent the North from building up nuclear weapons. China, as one of the North Korean regime's few friends, continues to support them because Beijing is more concerned about the regime collapse in Pyongyang. The North Korean leadership has placed its priority on keeping their power intact. Additionally, it is interesting to note that North Korea will not follow the Chinese development model that requires opening up its economy while maintaining its political structure. This model is simply not attractive to North Korea as even the opening up of its economy could severely

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weaken Kim Jong-il's hold on power. The nuclear weapons program in North Korea serves as a guarantee for the North Korean leader to remain in power.

### **South Korea's Relationships with Regional Powers**

***Do you see Russia playing any role in Asian security relations? If the Arctic begins to melt, there will be increased sea traffic along Russia's northern coast. Do you think Russia will take more active role in the region economically?***

PRESIDENT SOOK-JONG LEE: The Soviet Union was important to South Korea before its collapse in 1991. We tried to increase investment and expand our economic ties with the Soviet Union in the past. However, Russia has increasingly lost its attractiveness as a partner country to invest our diplomatic resources. Still, Russia is valuable for cooperation in certain sectors like energy and it is definitely beneficial for South Korea to maintain and broaden good relations with Russia.

***China is developing its blue water navy capability to protect their economic interests. How does that create instability in the Northeast Asian region since other countries are doing their own to protect their economic interests as well?***

PRESIDENT SOOK-JONG LEE: I am not a military expert, but from my limited knowledge, the Chinese naval capability is getting stronger, which triggered South Korea to build a strong navy in response. From the Japanese perspective, this Chinese move is certainly perceived as a potential threat.

***Northeast Asia's long history contributes to creating problems in South Korea-Japan relations. Given the fact that these two democracies share similarities and common threats from China as well as North Korea, do you feel that historical issues are just too strong to further strengthen bilateral relations with Japan? How have relations been between South Korea and Japan?***

MR. JUNG KIM: My simple answer is that the core security interests of South Korea and Japan converge as they both share many similarities in a democratic political system. Both Seoul and Tokyo share common interests to manage threats arising from the North Korean nuclear crisis and the rise of China. However, historical and territorial disputes between the two countries generate tensions, which can be easily manipulated by South Korean and Japanese politicians alike, particularly by right-wing policymakers. However, these issues cannot be fundamental threats that could disrupt bilateral relationships between the two neighboring countries.

PRESIDENT SOOK-JONG LEE: South Korea should align with Japan considering its shared value of liberal democracy. We also have alliance relationships with our common ally, the United States. South Korea has been cooperating with Japan using a lot of channels such as military exchanges and security cooperation, which has greatly contributed toward confidence-building between the two countries. However, there are limits to bilateral cooperation between the South Korean and Japanese governments. We cannot, for example, forge a direct military alliance with Japan although I have heard some Japanese security experts suggest the possibility of building a direct mil-

*“Speaking at the social level, South Koreans are no longer passionate about the unification of the two Koreas mainly due to the enormous costs they will have to bear.”*

itary alliance relationship between the two countries. South Korean experts are more cautious to put forward the idea of an alliance with Japan because this can provoke a rising China. Thus, it is better to continue trilateral cooperation using our common ally, the United States, in the East Asia region. From the South Korean perspective, we do not want to take sides with something that could instigate rivalry between China and Japan. Rather, we are hoping to be more of a bridging country that promotes peace and stability in East Asia.

### **Unification of the Two Koreas**

***I would like to hear your thoughts on the unification of the two Koreas. Do both South and North Korea agree on a one Korea unified? We are very familiar with differences between different visions for one Korea, but not with similarities. What would you think might be some of the similarities for these divergent visions of a united Korea?***

PRESIDENT SOOK-JONG LEE: Actually, the question of how we unify the two Koreas was one of the most important national security issues back in the 1990s. I remember that former South Korean president Kim Dae-jung had a concrete vision on how to reach the stage of unification on the Korean Peninsula. At that time, his idea of unification was based on the premise that South Korea would not pursue the unification by unilaterally absorbing the North. Rather, the option of a federation was largely accepted as the most appropriate. I know that North Korea had a similar vision for unification, which might be slightly different from the model endorsed by Seoul. In my personal opinion, I guess that North Korea still wants to take the South by aggres-

sive means. Similarly, South Korea might have to unilaterally absorb the North if the North Korean regime collapses. In this regard, the United States and South Korea are reviewing all possible scenarios, or possible contingency plans at the military level. Speaking at the social level, however, South Koreans are no longer passionate about the unification of the two Koreas. South Koreans now think more of the enormous costs they will have to bear in the wake of any unification on the Korean Peninsula. This pattern is more visible among the young generation who perceive the North as a separate sovereign country. Also, it is notable that the unification discourse has disappeared over the past ten years. Even the Lee administration focuses more about how to manage the ongoing nuclear crisis and help North Korea maintain a sustainable economy rather than unification itself. The unification of the two Koreas is thus no longer in the immediate interests of South Korea.

### **South Korea’s Perception on the United States**

***What do you use to better understand how the United States works and the U.S. role or view toward the region? Did you find any think tanks in the United States that are particularly useful in trying to understand the United States?***

PRESIDENT SOOK-JONG LEE: Most South Korean think tanks have been conducting extensive research on the United States. Honestly, we were quite disappointed at the Bush administration whose strategic focus narrowly centered on Afghanistan and Iraq in the post-9/11 world. The visibly decreased U.S. commitment or engagement in East Asia had been

a major concern for all Asian countries. Although the Obama administration expressed its clear message that the East Asia region is critical to its strategic interests, the issues involving the Middle East are still taking up the main discourse in Washington. We are hoping that the United States and East Asia will further develop constructive relationships in the twenty-first century.■

## **Participants**

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