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No. 193/2012 dated 12 October 2012

South Korea's Defence Reform Plan: A Case of Bad Timing?

By Han Nack Hoon

Synopsis

Having recognised North Korea's growing threat to its national security, the South Korean government has proposed further defence reform measures. It is, however, a bad time for the Seoul government to push the improvements.

Commentary

THE SOUTH Korean defence ministry's announcement last August of another mid- and long-term defence reform plan comes at a bad time for the government. The reforms are aimed at countering the security threat from North Korea in as much as to restructure the south's military forces and command structure.

Since the sinking of the Cheonan and the bombardment of Yeonpyeong Island in 2010 and 2011 respectively, defence reform has been one of the top political priorities of President Lee Myung-Bak's administration. Though politicians and pundits in Seoul have often expressed disagreement over the contents of the military reform measures, their ultimate aim has never been questioned. Unfortunately, the Lee administration is facing a number of unfavourable domestic political conditions that will potentially impair its ability to garner enough political support.

South Korea: militarily superior?

Due to South Korea's sustained economic growth for the past several decades, the country has been able to afford its ambitious military modernisation plan since the mid 1970s. From the strategic point of view, maintaining a strong and vibrant alliance with the US is a given factor for peace and security of South Korea. On the other hand, excessive dependence on its military alliance with the United States would also restrict or weaken South Korea's own geostrategic window of opportunity.

With the sustained economic growth and strategic consideration, the South Korean military has enjoyed a consistent modernisation process for more than three decades. As a result, its military capabilities have far surpassed North Korea's. For instance, major aerospace giants like Lockheed Martin and Boeing, and the European defence consortium group (EADS) have been invited for South Korea's bid for the next generation fighter jet procurement programme worth about US\$7 billion.

In contrast North Korea's fighter jets are mainly the ex Soviet-built fighter jets like the MiG-23, MiG-29, and

Sukhoi-25 from the 1970s and 1980s. Therefore, North Korea has had no other choice but to develop and improve its asymmetric warfare capabilities against South Korea. As for South Korea, its latest defence plan is a clear recognition of how dangerous is North Korea's asymmetric warfare capabilities to South Korea and its socio-economic infrastructures.

Ill-timed defence reform

In its defence plan, the South Korean defence ministry is to bolster the nation's cyber defence against potential cyber attacks from North Korea. Earlier this year, Seoul identified that Pyongyang had jammed its GPS signals, endangering civilian aircraft flying in and out of South Korea's international airports. To answer the latest wave of North Korean cyber attacks, the South's defence ministry announced it would reinforce the personnel at the Cyber Command, which was launched in 2010 as a military outfit to combat such cyber attacks.

The new defence plan also proposes a drastic increase of South Korea's surface-to-surface ballistic missile on the front line. The new plan will establish a whole new unit (an aerospace command) for the Air Force to monitor information-gathering satellites on the Korean peninsula. Consequently, the entire new defence plan will cost an additional US\$ 52.3 trillion to implement this five-year plan from 2012 to 2016. However, it needs parliamentary sanction to be implemented.

In a country where people live under the imminent threat of a neighbouring state, no one will gainsay the importance of national defence and the role of the military. Furthermore, regardless of where they stand in the country's political spectrum, for politicians of all hues the country's defence and/or security issues are politically very sensitive. Initiating a whole set of defence-related changes will require a series of political negotiations entailing numerous political leverages. Unfortunately, the timing is not the best one for the Lee administration to initiate such defence security-related changes:

Firstly, President Lee is in the last year of his presidential term. The entire political focus of South Korea is on the next presidential election in December 2012. President Lee's ruling Saenuri Party has already selected its presidential candidate. Given the preoccupation with the presidential election, defence issues will not be an urgent political agenda for the political parties, even for Mr. Lee's own party. In other words, an issue as important as this defence plan could well be put aside till after the December election.

Moreover, President Lee's declining popularity is another factor that could weaken the promotion of this defence plan. According to a recent poll in South Korea, his popularity is the lowest-ever for presidents. Considering his unfavourable public standing, it will be a huge political gamble for the ruling party to work on this sensitive agenda with a president whose popular mandate is plunging.

Can it be achieved?

Lastly, the plan also includes a sensitive point – South Korea's military's command restructuring. Its past attempt to restructure the military command had faced strong resistance not only from the opposition parties but also from some retired air force and naval officers. The Lee administration will no doubt expect a similar reaction from the dissenters to this defence plan.

No one in South Korea will deny the important role of the military since the country faces a clear and present danger from North Korea. It is well known that North Korea's asymmetric capabilities are very serious threats to South Korea's national security, to counter which the South needs to improve its own capabilities.

Unfortunately for South Korea, the timing for the defence reform, considering the various domestic political factors in the country, is not very good. More importantly, the entire administration, including President Lee, is neither in a strong position to push forward the defence plan.

Han Nack Hoon is a Senior Analyst with the Military Studies Programme at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University.