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No. 021/2013 dated 5 February 2013

South Korea's purchase of non-US helicopters: A Turning Point?

By Han Nack Hoon

Synopsis

South Korea's decision to purchase non-U.S. military helicopters could have implications for its future procurement of military systems. Could it be a turning point in the dynamics of South Korea's defence and security cooperation with the United States?

Commentary

IN WHAT is seen as a turning point in its military procurement practice South Korea has decided to purchase eight multi-mission maritime Lynx Wildcat helicopters for its Navy from the Anglo-Italian company Agusta-Westland instead of the Sikorsky Seahawk from the US. Cost appears to be the most important factor for the decision of the Defence Acquisition Programme Administration (DAPA), besides operational suitability and parts and training package.

The eight Lynx Wildcats, to be delivered over a two-year period from 2015, will cost US\$560 million, compared to the US\$1 billion price tag for the Seahawks. Another factor was Agusta-Westland's guarantee of industrial technology transfer to South Korea's defence industry. They will be deployed with the ROK Navy's destroyers and new generation frigates (known as the Future Frigate Experimental FFX).

Likely Future Developments

Although the ROK Navy's preference was for the US Seahawk because of its larger payload and interoperability with the US military, the DAPA took into account the US government's strong grip on technology transfer with the sale of its military weapons. Although it is a staunch US ally South Korea's access to military technology transfer is as restricted as for other customers. Besides, Washington probably considered another factor - that South Korea's military modernisation does not upset the strategic environment of the Korean peninsula and Northeast Asia.

The DAPA decision to select the Anglo-Italian helicopter has implications for other procurements for the military. One that is to be decided later this year is its FX-III programme. The Seoul government has allocated about USD\$7.3 billion for some 60 next-generation fighter jets for the ROK Air Force. The contenders are the Boeing's F-15 Silent Eagle, the Eurofighter Typhoon of the European Aeronautic Defense and Space (EADS) and the Lockheed Martin F-35A Lightning II Joint Strike Fighter.

Of these three next-generation fighter jets, the F-35 JSF has been mired in controversy over its escalating cost. A potential buyer like South Korea has to give a serious look at the financial feasibility of acquiring a fleet of the F-35 JSFs. Further the price of the F35 JSF is set by the US government and thus non-negotiable.

While Lockheed Martin has guaranteed technology transfers, they are subject to the US Government's consent. Washington has always maintained a strong grip on what can be given with the military weapons systems. Thus, in terms of price and technology transfer, the F-35 JSF might well be the least favoured among the three contenders of South Korea's FX-III procurement programme.

Balancing security needs and budgets

In as much as the US is struggling with substantial cuts in its defence budget, South Korea has also to be careful about its defence budget – particularly, as the South Korean public has expressed their increasing anxiety and dissatisfaction over the country's economic future. There is unusual consensus among the media that questions the financial feasibility of the F35 and the US government's restrictiveness in technology transfer. At a time when the F-35 JSF programme is uncertain of its progress and price, it is harder for the Seoul government to justify the procurement of such an untested and expensive weapons system.

Although it is argued that purchasing US-made weapons systems will guarantee South Korea's place in the US defence and security architecture and having the US as its military ally is an ultimate force-multiplier for the ROK military, it raises the question why South Korea should engage in such extravagant military expenditure when its military can be equipped with other first-rate weapons systems from various countries. Many South Korean critics have often challenged the rationale of the South Korean defence ministry's military procurement programme. They argue that South Korea's place in America's security and defence architecture should not preclude the country from procuring its military weapons systems at competitive prices.

While South Korea faces a looming national security threat, this does not permit the government to purchase whatever high-tech military weapons systems that are out there in the market. A rule of thumb followed by the South Korean military is that US defence contractors build the best and deadliest weapons systems. South Korea's military modernisation must continue in a way that helps minimise its security threat while being sensitive and smart in monetary considerations.

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