

# POLICY BRIEF

## South Korea's Defence Diplomacy in East Asia



**S. RAJARATNAM SCHOOL  
OF INTERNATIONAL STUDIES**

A Graduate School of Nanyang Technological University

Sarah Teo  
December 2013



# South Korea's Defence Diplomacy in East Asia

## Introduction

As the proverbial “shrimp among whales” in Northeast Asia, South Korea or the Republic of Korea (henceforth Korea) has often found itself caught among the dynamics of major power relations. It also has to manage the security challenge emanating from North Korea, officially known as the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK). Recognising that a stable region is necessary to ensure its security, Korea has pursued engagement not only with the United States through the mutual security alliance, but also with its neighbouring countries.

Defence diplomacy is one element in a country's toolbox of engagement strategies. Essentially, it involves utilising military and defence agencies to achieve broader foreign

and security policy aims, above and beyond their traditional function involving deterrence and armed conflicts. (See Figure 1 for a list of defence diplomacy activities.) In East Asia—defined in this brief as Northeast and Southeast Asia, the trend of using military and defence establishments for diplomacy purposes via dialogues and collaborative initiatives is emerging. This trend is exemplified in military exchanges, joint exercises, as well as forums such as the Shangri-La Dialogue, the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting (ADMM) and the ADMM-Plus involving ASEAN's dialogue partners. Defence diplomacy is important as it helps to enhance inter-operability, forge mutual trust and build confidence among militaries, thus boosting cooperation and reducing the risk of conflict.

Figure 1: Defence diplomacy activities

- ❖ Bilateral and multilateral contacts between senior military and civilian defence officials.
- ❖ Appointment of defence attachés to foreign countries.
- ❖ Bilateral defence cooperation agreements.
- ❖ Training of foreign military and civilian defence personnel.
- ❖ Provision of expertise and advice on the democratic control of armed forces, defence management and military technical areas.
- ❖ Contacts and exchanges between military personnel and units, and ship visits.
- ❖ Placement of military or civilian personnel in partner countries' defence ministries or armed forces.
- ❖ Deployment of training teams.
- ❖ Provision of military equipment and other material aid.
- ❖ Bilateral or multilateral military exercises for training purposes.

Source: Andrew Cottey and Anthony Forster, “Reshaping Defence Diplomacy: New Roles for Military Cooperation and Assistance,” *The Adelphi Papers* 44, issue 365 (2004): 6-7, doi: 10.1080/714027950.

For all the above reasons, Korea acknowledges the need to expand defence diplomacy with its East Asian neighbours. The overall objectives of Korea's defence diplomacy in East Asia are: (i) to build confidence and mutual trust; (ii) manage transnational security challenges; and (iii) manage the DPRK nuclear issue. These help to contribute to the broader goal of maintaining regional peace and stability, which in turn affects Korea's own peace and stability.

This policy brief examines current trends in Korea's defence diplomacy with the United States, China, Japan and Southeast Asian countries. This issue is important because Korea's defence engagement strategies will have implications for regional stability, via three issues:

(i) the U.S. presence in East Asia; (ii) progress on managing the DPRK nuclear issue; and (iii) the development of a regional defence cooperation framework which is ASEAN-centred. This policy brief is based on information from primary documents including the Defense White Papers, secondary literature and eleven interviews conducted with current and former Korean government officials and advisers as well as Track II individuals. Three main trends will be highlighted: (i) the United States remains the central partner of Korea's defence diplomacy; (ii) defence diplomacy with China and Japan is important and growing but faces challenges; and (iii) defence diplomacy with ASEAN is essential as it provides platforms for networking and communication.

## (I) The United States remains the central partner of Korea's defence diplomacy

Figure 2: Development of defence diplomacy between Korea and the United States



Source: Ministry of National Defense Republic of Korea, 2012 Defense White Paper, December 11, 2012, accessed from [www.mnd.go.kr](http://www.mnd.go.kr), pp.332-339.

- Just as the United States remains at the core of Korea's security strategy, it is also the central partner of Korea's defence diplomacy. Korea views the United States as a stabilising force in East Asia, and a necessary actor in helping to deter the DPRK from committing provocations.
- Current defence diplomacy with the United States involves senior-level dialogues such as the annual ROK-U.S. Security Consultative Meeting (SCM), the ROK-U.S. Integrated Defense Dialogue (KIDD), and their associated mechanisms. Both sides also conduct a number of joint military drills annually, including the Ulchi Freedom Guardian and the Key Resolve/ Foal Eagle exercises. Cultural and history exchanges, such as the "Friends Forever Program" and the "Good Neighbor Program" help to enhance personal ties between Korean and U.S. military personnel.

- In line with efforts to globalise the bilateral alliance, Korea has contributed to international peacekeeping activities led by the United States. Since 2009, it has participated in the Combined Task Force 151 (CTF-151), a multinational maritime task force to deter and counter piracy attacks in the Gulf of Aden and off the coast of Somalia. Korea has also deployed troops to support the work of the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan. Other than helping to maintain international peace and stability, interviewees noted that Korea views its contributions to such activities as a way of repaying the help it received during the Korean War.
- Even as Korea strengthens defence diplomacy with the United States, interviewees acknowledged that the country needs to also expand defence engagement with its neighbouring countries. Engagement with the rest of East Asia is viewed as a means to pursue military confidence building and prevent accidents or conflicts between states. However, such engagement has to take place under the framework of the Korea-U.S. alliance. In this regard, Korea sees strong defence relations with the United States as a pre-requisite to enhancing defence cooperation with China, Japan and Southeast Asian countries.

## (II) Defence diplomacy with China and Japan is important and growing but faces challenges

- From Korea's perspective, it is important to enhance defence diplomacy with China and Japan. Positive defence relations with its Northeast Asian neighbours are crucial as managing the DPRK issue remains the key challenge for Korea's security. Defence cooperation is also necessary to enhance military transparency, build mutual trust and forge common understandings on security issues, thus helping to avoid accidents or conflicts among the Northeast Asian states.

### Defence diplomacy with China

Figure 3: Development of defence relations between Korea and China



- Defence diplomacy with China is generally seen by Korea as an emerging area of cooperation, especially when compared to the high level of bilateral ties in the economic and socio-cultural sectors. In 2008, both sides elevated their relations to a “Strategic Cooperative Partnership,” providing the framework for more defence cooperation.
- Currently, bilateral defence interactions include the Defense Ministers’ Meeting, the Defense Strategic Dialogue at the vice minister level, talks between the military chiefs, working-level meetings, as well as exchange visits of naval ships and military personnel. The navies of both sides have also held four joint search and rescue exercises since 2005. These efforts were viewed by the interviewees as contributing to the overall enhancement of relations with China, which is particularly important due to Beijing’s role in managing the DPRK nuclear challenge and Korea’s close economic interdependence with China.
- Following the signing of the memorandum of understanding on bilateral defence exchange cooperation in 2012, both the Korean government and interviewees have expressed confidence that Sino-Korean military cooperation will expand and increase in importance.
- Interviewees noted two challenges that could potentially disrupt the progress of bilateral defence cooperation. First, Korea has to balance its growing defence diplomacy with China with the Korea-U.S. alliance. This means establishing and utilising channels of communication to reassure China that the Korea-U.S. alliance is non-threatening, and also to reassure the United States that engaging China does not diminish the importance of the mutual security alliance. Second, the push for closer defence cooperation with China may also be complicated by Korea’s military interactions with Taiwan.

### Defence diplomacy with Japan

Figure 4: Development of defence relations between Korea and Japan



- It is strategically important for Korea to forge defence links with Japan because both countries face many common challenges, such as the DPRK nuclear issue, as well as managing their security alliances with the United States and closer ties with China.
- Bilaterally, Korea and Japan hold military exchanges and defence dialogues via the Defense Ministers' Meeting, Vice Ministers' Meeting, working-level talks and military personnel exchanges. Since 1999, the navies of both countries have also conducted biennial search and rescue exercises. Given that both countries are military allies of the United States, trilateral naval exercises focusing on search and rescue are also a regular feature of military cooperative initiatives that boosts defence diplomacy between Korea and Japan.
- While working-level visits and exchanges are considered quite comprehensive and contribute to trust and confidence building, higher-level relations remain influenced by domestic politics and sentiment arising from political and historical disputes between Korea and Japan. Examples include the periodic suspension of high-level meetings and the failure to sign the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) in July 2012. Considering the common interests that both countries share, there is scope to enhance defence diplomacy but the turbulent political relations will continue to pose a challenge.

### (III) Defence diplomacy with ASEAN is essential as it provides platforms for networking and communication

- While ASEAN countries may not be as strategically important compared to China and Japan for Korea's defence, Seoul recognises that the influence of the ASEAN, as a collective grouping, is rising in regional and international affairs. In this regard, engaging ASEAN and its countries is a necessary element of Korea's middle power diplomacy.
- Korea's objectives of defence diplomacy with ASEAN countries, both bilaterally and multilaterally, include building mutual trust and confidence, as well as to create awareness of the DPRK issue and ultimately gain support for its policy regarding the DPRK. Based on the relevant literature and interviewees' accounts, engaging ASEAN on defence and security issues is also beneficial to Korea because of the following reasons:
  - (i) ASEAN serves as a platform for networking and engaging the major powers, thus helping to stabilise the region. Exercises under the ADMM-Plus rubric, such as the Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR)/Military Medicine Exercise in June 2013, essentially foster cooperation among the militaries of all 18 member countries. Such activities build military confidence and trust at both the bilateral and multilateral levels. Military-to-military relations are also enhanced, contributing to regional stability.
  - (ii) ASEAN and its related mechanisms are perceived as neutral, making it easier for China, Japan and Korea to engage each other through those platforms. The public pressure generated by bilateral high-profile defence interactions with, for example, Japan, is also largely absent. Without the ASEAN framework, defence and security cooperation among the three Northeast Asian countries are likely to be hindered by their political and historical disputes. In this regard, the potential regional security architecture, from Korea's perspective, is likely to be ASEAN-centred.
  - (iii) Multilateral security cooperation through ASEAN is important for a middle power like Korea, as it lacks the influence and resources to unilaterally influence regional dynamics. Such cooperation helps to foster dialogue among militaries and defence establishments, enhance mutual trust and military transparency, and manage disputes.

(iv) Through multilateral meetings, Korea is able to also enhance its bilateral defence diplomacy with individual Southeast Asian countries. For example, the Shangri-La Dialogue is one venue where bilateral meetings are often arranged on the sidelines among defence officials. Additionally, Korea conducts defence meetings and military exchanges, and has concluded defence agreements, with various ASEAN countries.

- At least one interviewee acknowledged that defence diplomacy and cooperation with ASEAN is unlikely to lead to solutions for Korea’s immediate security challenges. ASEAN and its related defence forums, such as the ADMM-Plus and the Shangri-La Dialogue, are thus seen more as channels of communication and networking. Seoul expects the ADMM-Plus to be the principal security and defence forum in East Asia as it is the first forum in the region exclusively involving the defence ministers. (See Figure 5 for a list of Asia Pacific multilateral forums that Korea’s Ministry of National Defense participates in.)

Figure 5: ROK Ministry of National Defense’s participation in Asia Pacific multilateral forums

Government Level (Track 1)	Semi-Government Level (Track 1.5)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>ASEAN Defence Ministers’ Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus) and its sub consultative framework</li> <li>ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF)</li> <li>Tokyo Defense Forum (TDF)</li> <li>Northeast Asia Peace and Security Mechanism Working Group within the Six Party Talks framework</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Asia Security Summit (ASS) / Shangri-la Dialogue</li> <li>Jakarta International Defense Dialogue (JIDD)</li> <li>Northeast Asia Cooperation Dialogue (NEACD)</li> </ul>

Source: Ministry of National Defense Republic of Korea, 2012 Defense White Paper, December 11, 2012, accessed from www.mnd.go.kr, pp. 101.

- Korea is likely to continue emphasising non-traditional security issues in its engagement with ASEAN, as it focuses on counter-piracy operations and HADR activities. There is also growing collaboration in defence industry, including arms exports, with selected ASEAN countries. (See Figure 6 for a list of ASEAN countries that Korea has concluded agreements on defence industrial cooperation with.)
- At the wider Asia Pacific level, Korea participates in multilateral drills such as Cobra Gold and Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC). It is also the host of the Seoul Defense Dialogue, established in 2012, which brings together defence officials from the Asia Pacific region to discuss security issues. Korea sees these efforts as trust and confidence building initiatives. In this regard, defence diplomacy efforts are a first step to enhancing relations. Only when a high level of confidence and mutual trust has been forged between both sides could cooperation then expand to include issues such as the DPRK nuclear challenge.

Figure 6: Korea’s agreements with ASEAN countries on defence industrial cooperation

Country	Signed in
Malaysia	June 1981
Thailand	April 1991
The Philippines	May 1994
Indonesia	October 1995
Vietnam	August 2001

Source: Ministry of National Defense Republic of Korea, 2012 Defense White Paper, December 11, 2012, accessed from www.mnd.go.kr, pp. 394.

## Conclusion

This policy brief has identified and discussed three main trends in Korea's defence diplomacy with East Asia: (i) the United States remains the central partner of Korea's defence diplomacy; (ii) defence diplomacy with China and Japan is important and growing but faces challenges; and (iii) defence diplomacy with ASEAN is essential as it provides platforms for networking and communication.

How Korea views and employs defence diplomacy in East Asia will have policy implications for Seoul and subsequently affect regional stability. First, given that Korea views the United States as the key partner for its defence and security, it is likely to continue actively engaging in defence diplomacy with the United States. Korea thus plays a part in retaining U.S. military presence and interest in East Asia. Furthermore, because the United States remains at the core of Korea's security, Seoul would be mindful of its bilateral security framework with Washington when it conducts defence diplomacy with regional countries.

Second, as the DPRK nuclear challenge remains a top security issue for Korea, it recognises the importance of enhancing defence and military relations with its other Northeast Asian neighbours. Korea could push for more working-level initiatives to build confidence and mutual trust among the militaries and defence establishments in Northeast Asia. However, higher level progress in this area would be slow-moving due to political and historical sensitivities.

Third, due to the political and historical sensitivities among the Northeast Asian states, Korea is likely to support a regional security architecture that is ASEAN-centred. Being perceived as neutral, ASEAN and its forums allow Korea to engage the major powers with fewer political repercussions. While the ASEAN-Plus defence mechanisms are unlikely to lead to solutions for Korea's immediate security challenges, these platforms are still important for Korea as they foster military-to-military communication and networking, thus contributing to trust and confidence building.

## Author's Biography

**Sarah Teo** is Associate Research Fellow with the Multilateralism and Regionalism Programme at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University. Her research interests include political and security cooperation in East Asia, the impact of major power relations on the regional

security architecture, as well as inter-Korean relations. Prior to joining RSIS, she was a researcher with the Ministry of Defence, Singapore. She received her Bachelor of Communication Studies from Nanyang Technological University in 2009 and her Master of Science (International Relations) from RSIS in 2012.

## About the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies

The S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) is a professional graduate school of international affairs at the Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. RSIS' mission is to develop a community of scholars and policy analysts at the forefront of security studies and international affairs. Its core functions are research, graduate education and networking. It produces cutting-edge research on Asia Pacific Security, Multilateralism and Regionalism, Conflict Studies, Non-Traditional Security, International Political Economy, and Country and Region Studies. RSIS' activities are aimed at assisting policymakers to develop comprehensive approaches to strategic thinking on issues related to security and stability in the Asia Pacific.

For more information about RSIS, please visit [www.rsis.edu.sg](http://www.rsis.edu.sg).





**S. RAJARATNAM SCHOOL  
OF INTERNATIONAL STUDIES**  
A Graduate School of Nanyang Technological University

S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University  
Block S4, Level B4, Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798

TEL 65 6790 6982 | FAX 65 6793 2991 | EMAIL [wwwrsis@ntu.edu.sg](mailto:wwwrsis@ntu.edu.sg) | WEBSITE [www.rsis.edu.sg](http://www.rsis.edu.sg)