

## How should South Korea respond to the new U.S. defense strategy?

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### Interviewees

Young Ho Kim

On January 5, 2012, the Obama administration unveiled the 2012 Defense Strategic Guidance which highlighted the Asia-Pacific region as the main area of focus for the new U.S. defense strategy. Professor Young Ho Kim of the Korea National Defense University discussed the implications of the new U.S. national defense strategies on the East Asia region and outlined the tasks for South Korea's national defense policy. The following is a summary of the main policy recommendations from the interview.

**Q1: What are the implications of the change in U.S. defense strategy for the security environment in East Asia and on the Korean Peninsula?**

**A1-1: "The reinforcement of U.S. military power in the region will lead to a strengthened deterrence capacity against North Korea."**

- The shift in the strategic priority from Europe to Asia-Pacific will have some positive implications for U.S. allies in the region. This is because the reinforcement of U.S. military forces deployed in South Korea, Japan, Australia and the Asia-Pacific region will naturally mean a strengthened deterrence capacity against North Korea.

**A1-2: "It will also enhance the strategic value of South Korea."**

- The role played by U.S. forces in South Korea and Japan will become very important for the United States in respect of its relations with China, which means the strategic value of South Korea will also be enhanced. This will likely influence upon the United States which will then need to enhance its understanding of the alliance with South Korea and accordingly strengthen it.

**A1-3: "The cost of maintaining the alliance will most likely increase."**

- The difficulty with the planned strengthening of U.S. military forces in the Asia-Pacific region is that it is being undertaken in a financially strained environment. It can therefore be expected that Washington will demand its allies to take on more burden-sharing. Seoul will of course be asked to share more defense costs and possibly take on a more expanded regional role. Accordingly, South Korea should be prepared for such an outcome.

This product presents a policy-oriented summary of the Smart Q&A.

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**A1-4: "If the ROK-U.S.-Japan-Australia network is further strengthened it could provoke China in the long run."**

- Due to the relative decline in its power, the United States will possibly make efforts to galvanize not only its pre-existing bilateral alliances, but also establish a network among its allies in the region such as South Korea, Japan, Australia, and Thailand and encourage greater military cooperation among them. For China such a development would be interpreted as an effort to contain its peaceful rise. Considering such sensitivities, South Korea needs to be prudent, so as not to appear as being part of a U.S.-effort to contain China.

**Q2: What specific policy measures should be taken by the South Korean government regarding the change in the U.S. defense strategy?**

**A2-1: "A forward-looking perspective is needed so that the new U.S. defense strategy does not disrupt the current modernization plans for the South Korean military."**

- It seems that the new U.S. defense strategy will not have any immediate negative impact on South Korea's security. There are aspects however, where it will have an impact in the long-run on South Korea's military modernization plans that look to integrate the command structure and modernize all components of the military. Currently, the defensive responsibilities for the Korean Peninsula are that South Korea is mainly responsible for the ground component while the United States provides the naval and air components. If the U.S. follows through on its new defense strategy guidelines and reduces the size of its ground forces while reinforcing its naval and air forces, the current system of shared responsibilities on the Korean Peninsula will become even more entrenched. In such a case, military reform in South Korea will unlikely to progress beyond the army. It is important to have a more forward-looking approach in order to achieve a balanced modernization of the ROK military. The new U.S. defense strategy guidelines must not distort the long-term direction of the modernization of the ROK military.

**A2-2: "The ROK-U.S. alliance must ensure that increased flexibility of U.S. Forces in Korea will not undermine the deterrence against North Korea."**

- As the new U.S. defense strategy will increasingly be focused on the Asia-Pacific region, it will be likely that U.S. Forces in Korea (USFK) will become more flexible so that they can be deployed to other parts of the region when needed. Such possible USFK deployments to other areas outside the Korean Peninsula would have a major impact on maintaining an effective deterrence against North Korea. It could even lead Pyongyang to mistakenly believe that the USFK deterrence has weakened as troops are deployed outside the Korean Peninsula. Prior consultations must be undertaken between South Korea and the United States in order to avoid such misperceptions evolving.

**A2-3: "Change in the U.S. defense strategy should be viewed as an opportunity to improve the ROK military."**

- According to the new defense strategy guidelines, the United States will be focused on improving its asymmetric warfare capabilities, precision strike systems, as well as its intelligence and surveillance platforms. Such a focus can

also be immensely beneficial to South Korea's efforts to improve the fighting capabilities of its own forces. By participating in this process through various means of cooperation with the United States such as joint development, combined training, and military exchanges will provide an opportunity for the ROK military to acquire cutting-edge weapon systems and military capabilities.

**A2-4: "Establishment of peace in East Asia must be achieved through pursuing smart diplomacy and avoiding U.S.-China rivalry."**

- The ROK-U.S. alliance is essential for maintaining stability on the Korean Peninsula. China though views the new U.S. defense strategy as part of a containment strategy, meaning that South Korea will have to exercise great caution to avoid being caught up in U.S.-China rivalry which will harm its interests. In order to avoid any negative impact, the ROK-US alliance should pursue bilateral and multilateral military exchanges with neighboring countries such as China, Russia, and Japan. This effort should be orchestrated as a long-term strategic military diplomacy with the intention of establishing a system of multilateral security cooperation in the region.

**About the Interviewees**

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Professor Young Ho Kim obtained his Ph.D at Ohio State University. He is currently a professor of security policy studies at Korea National Defense University and holds office as the chair of U.S.-China Research Center at Korea Institute for National Security Affairs.