

U.S. Defense Budget Cuts: Implications for South Korea's Military Policy

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Interviewee

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With a call for major reductions in its defense budget, the U.S. government has been reviewing the organizational design of its armed forces, which has the potential to significantly compromise the country's military capacity. As one of America's principal military allies, South Korea is inevitably affected by America's plan to transform its military policy. On August 7, 2013, EAI invited Won Gon Park, Professor at Handong Global University, to assess the prospects of the U.S. military reorganization, its implications to changing security environment in Northeast Asia, and possible recommendations for South Korea.

Q1: How would the U.S. government restructure its armed forces under the pressure of having to downsize its military spending?

A1: "The U.S. government must choose to reduce either the capacity by downsizing the armed forces or the capability by reducing investment in military modernization and high-tech weaponry. It is likely that the U.S. would opt for the former."

- Strategic Choices and Management Review, issued on July 31 by Chuck Hagel, U.S. Secretary of Defense, discusses a series of countermeasures the U.S. government can take under the pressure of downsizing its military budget. The U.S. has already confirmed its plan to cut defense spending by 487 billion dollars in the next ten years. With the enactment of sequester cuts, the U.S. defense forces would have to reduce the budget by additional 500 billion dollars, one trillion dollars in total. In the review, Secretary Hagel warned that while the existing plan to cut 487 billion dollars does not entail much difficulty as the U.S. eventually withdraws its commitment from the Middle East, additional reduction would inevitably cause considerable damage upon the country's military readiness posture. The review appears to be written precisely to urge the U.S. government to formulate practicable countermeasures against large-scale military budget cuts and forewarn the Congress that additional cuts can possibly jeopardize the U.S. authority as a prime actor in the international community.
- The U.S. Department of Defense announced that with major reductions in military spending, its remaining option is to restructure its armed forces by compromising either the military capacity or capability. Cutting the size of the active Army, Marine Corps, carrier strike groups, and decrepit bombers has been suggested as a means to scale back the capacity. Budget restriction on development, acquisition, and maintenance of high-tech military weapons was laid out as an option to downsize the military capability. Taking into consider-

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ation military transformation commanded under Donald Rumsfeld, then-Secretary of Defense, during George W. Bush's first presidential term and "Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense" issued in January 2012 as a part of the Defense Strategic Review, it is evident that the U.S. would reinforce the military capability and cut back on the capacity. In particular, security threat from China's ongoing development of Anti-Access Area Denial (A2AD) strategy, including missiles and submarines, to counter the U.S. power projection into the Asia-Pacific region magnifies America's need to expand its military capability to develop more high-tech weapons. U.S. has no choice but to trade away the capacity in response to military budget cuts.

- Trading off the military capacity by shrinking the size of the Army, the Marine Corps, and carrier strike groups in response to the military budget cuts is significant in three aspects. First, the U.S. government suggested an option to severely cut the size of the active Army from the current 540 thousand down to as few as 380 thousand troops. The idea of reducing the number of troops to below 400 thousand has important strategic implications. In early 2012, the announcement by the U.S. Department of Defense of its plan to reduce the size of the armed forces to 500 thousand troops, as outlined in the Defense Strategic Review, caught the eyes of the world. In order for the U.S. to continue with the Two-War Strategy which aims to fight two major ground wars in the Middle East and the Korean Peninsula, it needs to retain the number of its armed forces to be at least 800 thousand. Thus, the announcement to reduce the size of the active Army virtually denotes America's renouncement of the Two-War Strategy. With the military size of 500 thousand troops, the U.S. is likely to maintain its military capacity enough to adopt "1+2" strategy under which it engages in war in one area and simultaneously conceives stabilization operations or preparatory operations in case of rapidly changing situation. In this context, the latest statement that the U.S. government would downsize the army to below 400 thousand troops means that the U.S. would no longer be able to successfully manage a full-scale war even in one area. Especially the plan to deploy 650 thousand ground forces to the Korean Peninsula in case of crisis loses credibility and plausibility.
- The second item raised by the U.S. government is to downsize the Marine Corps from existing 180 thousand to 150 thousand. The Marine Corps is traditionally an offensive force as well as a quick reaction force. Shrinking the Marine Corps would significantly jeopardize America's timely response in deploying troops to global conflict zones.
- Third, the plan to reduce carrier strike groups from eleven to eight or nine has been raised. As was the case in the Middle East conflicts, aircraft carrier functions as an advanced base, deployed to the battle zone prior to the actual battle. U.S. plan to cut down on the size of carrier strike groups inevitably leads to its need to make better use of and rely heavily on its overseas military bases in the U.S. allies as staging base when engaging in a war.
- Overall, additional cuts to the U.S. defense budget will significantly undermine its military prowess and restrict power projection capability. Not only would the range of missions operable by the U.S. troops be decreased to a fair extent, but the range of areas in which the U.S. could simultaneously engage in case of conflicts would be significantly compromised. While it is true that such foreboding would be realized only when the Department of Defense formally finalizes large-scale military budget cuts under the compulsory forfeiture policy, the importance of reviewing such possibility lies in the fact that the U.S. government could eventually be driven to make additional defense budget cuts.

Q2: What relevance does the restructuring of the U.S. armed forces have with the changing security environment in Northeast Asia?

A2: "With the expansion of China's Anti-Access Area Denial (A2AD) weapons system, it is highly likely that U.S. rebalancing strategy would face substantial limitations. Also, as large-scale support from the U.S. has now become virtually implausible, the existing operational scheme regarding the Korean Peninsula needs to be re-examined."

- "Small but effective modular force structure"¹ was a military transformation strategy already proposed by then-President Bush during the first term, but postponed due to the commitment to the "War on Terror." Thus, the organizational redesign of its armed forces in accordance with this modular force structure should be familiar and not be much of a problem. Matter of concern lies in that the military transformation is not driven by the country's conceptual readjustment, but rather coerced by budget constraints, which limits flexibility and creativity in the process. Time constraints imposed by compulsory military budget cuts act as hindrance to productive progression of the military transformation.
- U.S. defense budget cuts would directly affect the security environment in Northeast Asia by severely restricting the U.S. rebalancing strategy at least in terms of military operations. Whereas China is increasing its defense spending and successfully building A2AD, the U.S. is likely to continually cut back on its military budget, making it more difficult to rapidly and effectively deploy its armed forces to Northeast Asia. Therefore, the U.S. rebalancing strategy is likely to be executed through diplomatic channels, in particular through enhanced cooperation and partnership with allies, rather than through military measures.
- While some scholars argue that shrinking gap between the U.S. and China in their military capacities would increase the possibility of a bilateral total war between the two, this total war argument is unconvincing; there is no likelihood that the U.S. and China would engage in a total war. Taiwan or the Korean Peninsula is the only area in which two great powers might fight ground wars, and yet, even this possibility has recently been diminished. If the U.S. and China ever engage in a war, it would be in the form of a limited war or a local war over a sudden changing environment surrounding the Korean Peninsula or the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands conflict. Because the U.S. Department of Defense acknowledges the implausibility of a total war, it focuses on quick reaction capability (QRC) in redesigning its armed forces. In order for China to build up its military strength to match that of the U.S., China needs to expand its power projection capability by equipping carrier strike groups or overseas bases, both of which are highly challenging. Although there are differing opinions among scholars, construction of a carrier strike group which requires technical skills, operability, and firsthand battle experiences is likely to take China at least 15 years.
- The operational scheme based on large-scale support from the U.S. army at the time of crisis on the Korean Peninsula requires a re-examination. The U.S. has stopped dispatching large-scale ground forces since its involvement in the first Gulf War in 1991. As was evident in the "War on Terror" in Afghanistan and Iraq, the U.S. now first employs naval or air forces to directly strike or neutralize command groups of the enemy, and immediately moves on to stabilization operations. Such shift in war operations is not surprising with respect to substantial costs to maintain, penetrate, and station ground forces, and the domestic political risks caused by mass casualties. Likewise, the operational plan on the Korean Peninsula should be readjusted on the basis of conceptual transformation in the U.S. military strategy.

¹ Modular force structure or modularization is a core concept of military transformation that maximizes readiness and flexibility in arranging and assembling troop deployment and conduct of operations of combat brigades by standardizing force structure like Lego blocks.

Q3: In response to the prospective U.S. military budget cuts and organizational shift in its armed forces, how should South Korea reformulate its military strategy?

A3: "For the transfer of wartime OPCON, Korea needs to make a practical decision based on its military's strategic operational capability. Transparency and effectiveness in post management should be the primary agenda in defense cost-sharing between South Korea and the U.S."

- U.S. defense budget cuts inevitably imply South Korea's increased role and responsibility. Since Korea is also subject to domestic political factors against expansion of its military spending, 'selection and concentration' management is essential.
- The most pressing task for South Korea is to undertake national defense reform for the achievement of military effectiveness. The core idea behind the national defense reform under the former Lee Myung-bak administration was to reorganize military command structure to effectively manage overlapping assets and operational factors among ground, naval, and air forces. Due to a lack of political will, defense reform failed to be enforced even though answers to adjust command structure have been produced by substantial research and studies. Taking the restructuring of the U.S. armed forces into consideration, South Korea needs to be in charge of defending the Korean Peninsula, regardless of wartime operational control (OPCON) is transferred to Korea. It is necessary for South Korea to be equipped with a flexible system that can fulfill its increasing role in national defense.
- Among multiple suggestions on the right time for transferring OPCON, the most appropriate approach is to adjust the time of transfer based on practical analysis of South Korean military's operational capability. In 2012, the U.S. and South Korea performed the assessment of Korea's Initial Operational Capability (IOC) which analyzed the country's base formation, equipments, and core mission capability. South Korea's Final Operational Capability (FOP) is currently under review to evaluate Korea's capability after the OPCON transfer. It is necessary for Korea to delay OPCON transfer if it does not acquire the full range of capabilities to lead wartime operations in terms of military equipment, strategy, and operational experience.
- As for the defense cost-sharing issue, South Korea and the U.S. are to reach a conclusion by October, 2013. One of the major problems in defense cost-sharing is that the information on the use of Korea's share of defense costs and the management of Korea's earlier contributions are not transparent. Although Korea and the U.S. are aware of this problem, both have not discussed any measure to overcome it. With only one month remaining until the negotiation is to be concluded, it will be difficult to materialize solutions. Instead, it is more reasonable to add mandatory clauses on joint research or working group discussions to enhance transparency and post-management as a part of the bilateral defense cost-sharing agreement.

About the Interviewee

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Won Gon Park is currently a professor of international languages and literature at Handong Global University. He was previously a research fellow at the Center for Security and Strategy, Korea Institute for Defense Analyses (KIDA). Professor Park earned his M.A. from Boston College and received his Ph.D. in international politics from Seoul National University.