



I ssue B riefing

The New U.S. Defense Strategic Guidance and Its Implications for South Korean Security

February 9, 2012

Young Ho Kim

On January 5, 2012, U.S. President Barack Obama paid a rare visit to the Pentagon and unveiled his guidelines for the Department of Defense to set the goals and priorities of its defense strategy for the next ten years. The resulting eight-page-long guidelines, entitled *Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense* (hereafter DSG),¹ contain the administration's assessment of changing global security conditions and propose the roles and shape of the U.S. armed forces for the coming decade. Prepared through "unprecedentedly" close consultations between the President himself and senior leaders in the U.S. defense department and military including both service chiefs and combatant commanders, the DSG defines the present as a historic "inflection point" and envisions the future U.S. military as "smaller and leaner, but agile, flexible, ready and technologically advanced."² Moreover, in accordance with the DSG the U.S. defense budget will be cut by \$487 billion and the sizes of the Army and Marine Corps will shrink by 80,000 and 14,000 respectively over the next ten years.³ While a more detailed picture will be revealed next month with the administration's FY2013 budget request to Congress, the DSG reflects the Obama administration's arduous effort to rebalance and redirect its defense priorities and spending under severe fiscal austerity.⁴

Because of the unusual timing of its publication and the magnitude of the reduction in defense spending, the DSG has generated controversy and concern domestically in the United States as well as interna-

tionally. In the United States, particularly people in the conservative wing of the Republican Party have been prompted to criticize the guidelines for putting the nation's security in danger,⁵ whereas some people on the liberal side have advocated seeking deeper and bolder cuts in defense spending.⁶ Internationally, China was understandably the first to respond negatively to the DSG. For example, rebutting the DSG's portrayal of Beijing's military policy as lacking transparency as "groundless and untrustworthy," Liu Weimin, a spokesman of the Chinese Foreign Ministry, stressed that Beijing was committed to peaceful development and "defensive" policy.⁷

What then are the implications of the DSG for South Korean security? Will there be any changes in U.S. defense policy or posture in the region under the DSG that may affect security conditions in South Korea significantly and, if so, require new measures or scrutiny by the South Korean government or the military? In fact, there have been largely four issues raised by the news media in South Korea. I will examine

As an Asia Security Initiative core institution, the East Asia Institute acknowledges the grant support from the MacArthur Foundation that made this research possible.

The East Asia Institute
909 Sampoong B/D, Eulji-ro 158, Jung-gu,
Seoul 100-786, South Korea
Phone 82 2 2277 1683 Fax 82 2 2277 1697
Email eai@eai.or.kr Website www.eai.or.kr

The East Asia Institute takes no institutional position on policy issues and has no affiliation with the Korean government. All statements of fact and expressions of opinion contained in its publications are the sole responsibility of the author or authors.



these four issues, and then discuss more challenging concerns that will require closer attention by South Korean foreign and security policy-makers.

On Possible Reduction in Troop Size of the U.S. Forces in Korea (USFK)

Since one of the most notable points in the DSG is a reduction in the U.S. ground forces—Army and Marine Corps—the first and foremost concern raised by many South Koreans concerns the possibility of a reduction in troop size of the USFK in the future. Pointing to the winding down of wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the DSG emphasizes that the U.S. military will get rid of “outdated Cold War-era systems,” i.e., large conventional ground forces⁸ and also that these will “no longer be sized to conduct large-scale, prolonged stability operations.”⁹ Under the DSG, accordingly, the Army will reportedly shrink down to 490,000 from 570,000 and the Marine Corps to 188,000 from 202,000 troops over the next decade. Given these large reduction plans for the ground forces, South Korean concerns about the reduction of USFK troops seem valid.

The drastic reduction in the numbers of USFK troops, however, is not likely to occur, at least in the near future. This is so because of two reasons. First, the DSG makes it clear that the future pivot of U.S. strategic interests will be the Asia-Pacific region, and the United States continues to firmly maintain its presence and involvement in the region due to the rise of China. President Obama himself also pledged during his trip to Australia and in announcing the DSG at the Pentagon that the United States “will be strengthening our presence in [the] Asia Pacific and budget reductions will not come at the expense of that critical region.”¹⁰ In addition, Secretary Leon Panetta assured observers that the United States would “increase its institutional weight and focus on enhanced presence, power projection, and deterrence in the Asia-Pacific.”¹¹ This means that the major reductions in troops will

take place in the U.S. forces in Europe and elsewhere rather than in Asia, including South Korea.¹²

Second, even though the planned troop reduction is quite substantial, the force sizes of the U.S. Army and Marine Corps will be still larger by 8,000 and 15,000 troops respectively than those prior to 9/11. With these troops, the U.S. military even declared that it will still be able to conduct two major regional wars simultaneously. Thus, the planned force reductions under the DSG alone will not affect the future size of USFK troops in the near term. After all, it is widely reported by the South Korean news media that no major change in the force level of USFK after the budget cut was confirmed repeatedly from recent meetings among high-ranking defense officials and military leaders from both countries.¹³

On the Prospect for Additional Dispatch of U.S. Forces in a Massive Korean Contingency

According to a present operational plan for the ROK-U.S. combined forces responding to a North Korean invasion (OPLAN 5027), it is known that the “U.S. will deploy 690,000 ground troops, 160 destroyers, and 2,000 aircraft within 90 days.”¹⁴ While the feasibility of such a large magnitude of force augmentation was questioned even before the DSG,¹⁵ it is far more doubtful with reduced troop levels under the DSG. This is true because executing the OPLAN as planned implies deployment of the entire U.S. Army and Marine Corps after the budget cuts.

Frankly, this issue cannot completely be put to rest here because we do not know the exact content of the OPLAN due to its confidential nature. The concern, however, can be somewhat alleviated, if we consider the following two points. First, whether the U.S. government will dispatch additional forces to a war on foreign soil is a matter of its will rather than its capability. In other words, a decision on force augmentation is not purely military. It is more political in nature.



This means that more important things affecting the decision will be public opinion and political leadership at the time of the contingency. If public opinion is favorable and political leaders are committed strongly enough, the U.S. government can dispatch additional troops through rapid activation of the National Guard and Reserves and even a drastic increase of recruitment. Indeed, the DSG explicitly mentions the important roles played by the Reserve Component during the past decade's wars and emphasizes its continuous employment for the future.¹⁶ In addition, the very fact that the DSG stresses the concept of "reversibility" and protection of its ability to regenerate shows that the administration is also keen to and ready for redirecting its strategy if required.¹⁷

Second, as long as U.S. ground forces are stationed in South Korea, the U.S. government, once pulled into a militarized conflict with North Korea, cannot easily abandon its commitment to South Korean security. Not only does the U.S. government cherish the effort and cost that it has already devoted to maintain the alliance for the past sixty years, but it also would have concerns about possible damage to its national image and other alliance relationships that would be caused by withdrawing its commitment to South Korean security during wartime. It is more likely, therefore, that the United States will strive to defeat and deter a North Korean invasion as eagerly as the South Korean military, which implies that if necessary, the U.S. government is willing to dispatch additional forces.

On an Increase in Strategic Flexibility of the USFK

One of the focal points of the DSG is to make the U.S. armed forces more agile, flexible, and quickly deployable, while also down-sizing them. This approach echoes very much, as some have pointed out, the goal of smaller but "agile, faster, and lean[er] forces" that had been advanced vigorously by the former Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld during the Bush ad-

ministration.¹⁸ In fact, in order to maintain their readiness and effectiveness at the same level, it is logical to make down-sized forces more versatile and agile as the DSG directs. Moreover, reductions of the U.S. forces stationed in Europe will obviously raise the chances for USFK to be dispatched to contingencies in other areas of the world. All in all, this means that the DSG will increase the USFK's strategic flexibility more.

Increases in the USFK's strategic flexibility, however, engender two security concerns among South Koreans. First, it may weaken the USFK's readiness and morale due to forces' frequent flow-in and flow-out of South Korea. Or it can lead North Koreans to misjudge the USFK's strength. Both actual and misjudged weakening of the USFK's strength can, then, increase the possibility of Pyongyang's provocation or aggression toward South Korea. Second, it could raise the chance that South Korea will be drawn into an unwanted, militarized conflict. The most exemplary case that South Koreans want to avoid is an armed conflict in the Taiwan Strait, because dispatch of the USFK there could bear a high risk of the South Korean military's involuntary involvement in a war with China. In fact, this was one of the main sources of friction and uneasiness between Seoul and Washington during the previous Roh Moo-hyun administration.

In the first 2+2 strategic dialogue (2006) participated in by both countries' foreign and defense ministers and secretaries, Seoul and Washington managed to reach a compromise in which both sides recognized each other's needs and concerns. That is, while Seoul acknowledged the necessity of strategic flexibility of the USFK, Washington agreed to take into consideration the South Korean concern about involuntary involvement in a regional conflict, especially in the Taiwan Strait. Increasing strategic flexibility of the USFK in the future directed by the DSG will, however, require more than mutual recognition of each other's needs and concerns. A more formal and transparent mechanism needs to be set up so that Washington can notify Seoul when more than a certain size of its



troops moves in and out of South Korea. The mechanism can also serve as a channel through which both sides can discuss and consult on how to replace and/or complement the capabilities of flowing-out forces. In addition, Seoul and Washington should seek more strenuously to find ways to improve the USFK's stationing conditions. Naturally, a better quality of life in stationing places will attract more competent military service personnel and elevate the troops' morale. Then, such bases are more likely to be designated as "forward-stationed" rather than "rotationally-deployed" ones, which can guarantee more firmly the troops' return. In that context a recent initiative of USFK such as "tour normalization"—36-month tour accompanied by their families—is desirable and should be pursued more strongly.

On the Growing Demand for More Burden-Sharing

As noted earlier, one of the main forces behind the DSG is severe fiscal constraint. Thus, Washington's demand and pressure for more burden-sharing on the part of its allies and partners will certainly increase in the future. While there is no explicit mentioning of increases in burden-sharing, the necessity and importance of cooperation and collaboration among allies and partners are repeatedly emphasized throughout the DSG. By underscoring NATO's "Smart Defense" approach to pool, share, and specialize capabilities among member states, the DSG makes clear its intention to seek more cooperation and burden-sharing with its allies and partners in the future.

Noting that the future strategic focus of the United States will be on the Asia-Pacific, the DSG underlines deeper involvement of the United States in the region. However, this does not mean that the United States will act alone. Instead, the United States will utilize its network of alliances in the region effectively as well as frequently. That is why the DSG alludes to

increasing the strategic flexibility of USFK as discussed above. That is, Washington expects the South Korean military to play more roles in defending and defeating North Korea, which can give the USFK more room to play other regional and global security roles.

In fact, Defense Secretary Panetta explicitly emphasized the importance of alliance cooperation and burden-sharing among its allies and partner states in the Halifax International Security Forum last November.¹⁹ That is, underscoring that "the United States military alone cannot be all things to all nations," he insisted, "it must also be complemented by strong alliances, partnerships, regional efforts at cooperation all have to be part of the answer." He also maintained that "the U.S. would share its burdens more and more effectively with our partners."

The cost sharing between South Korea and the United States for maintenance of the USFK is determined every five years through negotiations, called Special Measures Agreements (SMA), and the most recent SMA was reached in 2009. Under the 2009 SMA, South Korea has contributed directly about US\$743 million in 2011, which comprises about 42 percent of the total cost of maintaining the USFK.²⁰ Pointing to South Korea's advanced economic power, Washington continues to urge Seoul to increase its contribution. In fact, it is reported that U.S. defense officials recently have called again for South Korea to raise its share to at least 50 percent.²¹ With the announcement of the DSG, the pressure from the U.S. government for South Korea's cost share to increase is expected to be far stronger.

In principle, as the South Korean economy grows, its share of the burden to maintain the alliance must increase accordingly. Yet, considering the current high uncertainty in the global economy and the present level of South Korea's cost-sharing for the ROK-U.S. alliance, a demand for drastic increase in burden-share would be an excessive one. South Korean defense expenditure consists of 2.7 percent of its GDP, while only four of 27 NATO member states spend



more than 2 percent of their GDP for their defense. This means that South Korean defense expenditures are relatively high. Despite such a large amount of spending on defense, South Korea still has to keep increasing its annual defense budgets for successful defense reform by 2030 (Defense Reformation 11-30) and also for a secure wartime operational transfer by 2015 (Strategic Alliance 2015). In this situation, it is too burdensome both politically and fiscally for the South Korean government to pay a drastically increased larger cost sharing for the alliance. Furthermore, people tend to think that burden sharing should be fair and equitable. Thus, most South Koreans' view is that the stronger United States must share more than the weaker South Korea. This means that the U.S. government's excess pressure on more cost sharing in the next SMA negotiations may cause an undesirable spread of anti-American sentiment among the South Korean public, which neither side wants to see.

For a Long-term Challenge that Requires Closer Attention

From the above discussion, we can conclude that there will be no immediate negative impact by the newly released DSG either on South Korean security or its alliance relationship with the United States. The concerns raised by the news media in South Korea have mostly been somewhat exaggerated or based on misunderstandings. In the long term, however, the DSG may pose a more serious challenge to South Korea because the DSG makes it clear that the dynamic relations between the United States and China have become one of the major forces shaping the global as well as regional order. So the main U.S. strategic focus will shift to coping with the rising China. More concretely, the DSG highlights the growing Chinese anti-access and anti-denial (A2AD) capabilities as a major operational challenge to the U.S. power projection,

and stresses the implementation of the Joint Operational Access Concept to effectively counter A2AD.

The shift of the U.S. strategic focus under the DSG can be both a blessing and a burden for South Korea. On the one hand, it will increase the strategic value of South Korea and lead to strengthening of the U.S. commitment to South Korean security and the ROK-U.S. alliance. It is thus a blessing for South Korean capabilities to defend and deter North Korean aggression. On the other hand, it may also mean an increase of the U.S. demand for South Korea to join in its checking and hedging policy against China in the region. For example, the United States can call for the South Korean military to participate in developing and deploying its missile defense system in the region or intensify trilateral military cooperation among South Korea, the U.S., and Japan. Taking such actions will be a burden for South Korea because it can affect negatively upon the South Korean relationship with China. Therefore, the shift of the U.S. strategic focus under the DSG will present South Korean policymakers a daunting task of maintaining the healthy alliance relationship with the U.S. without disrupting the "comprehensive strategic partnership" with China.

Needless to say, the alliance with the U.S. is an essential element of South Korean security and will remain so until the unification of the two Koreas. However, maintaining a friendly relationship with China is also important for South Korea because of its strategic as well as economic interests. China has been the number one trade partner for South Korea since 2004 with 24.1 % of exports and 16.5 % of imports comprise of South Korea's trade with China in 2011.²² Disruption of such close economic ties will certainly cause a major economic hardship for South Korea. In addition to such economic interests, there are also some other issues of strategic interest that require Chinese cooperation and support. For example, drawing solution for North Korean nuclear issues, restraining of North Korean aggressive behavior, and peaceful unification



of the Korean Peninsula are the issues requiring China's cooperation.

What then will be an appropriate choice for South Korea? First of all, Seoul should be cautious not to stimulate competition and confrontation between the United States and China in the region. To do so, it will require prudent and competent diplomatic skill of South Korean policy makers in handling the relationships with the United States and China. Next, Seoul may pursue actions that will initiate and facilitate cooperation among the countries in the region. For example, it can propose and promote inclusive multilateral cooperation mechanisms in the region such as a joint energy development project with China, Russia, and Japan, a cooperative environment protection program with China and Japan, or a multilateral disaster relief force with the United States, China, Japan, and Russia. Such joint programs will create common interests and enhance greater mutual understandings, which can eventually lead to a more cooperative and peaceful condition in the whole region. In sum, it is time for South Korean policy makers to contemplate the long-term, not near-term implications of the DSG for their foreign and security policy and seek a smart way to cope with them. ■

Acknowledgement

The author appreciates Chaesung Chun for helpful comments.

——— *Young Ho Kim* is a professor in the Department of International Relations at Korea National Defense University.

Notes

¹ The U.S. Department of Defense. 2012. *Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense*. January.

² Leon Panetta. "Statement on Defense Strategic Guidance." <http://www.defense.gov/speeches/speech.aspx?speechid=1643> and "Forward." DSG.

³ Julian E. Barnes and Nathan Hodge. 2012. "Military Faces Historic Shift." *Wall Street Journal*. January 6.

⁴ Some present a more political interpretation. They argue that the DSG is driven by President Obama's reelection campaign and is intended to rebuke the chorus of Republican presidential candidates who have sought to portray Obama as decimating the Pentagon budget and being weak in his response to Iran. For more on such a view, see Bumiller, Elisabeth and Thom Shanker. 2012. "A Strategy for a Leaner Military, With Obama Taking the Lead." *New York Times*. January 6.

⁵ For example, see Holmes, Kim R. 2012. "What's the Big Idea? Obama Defense Strategy a Masquerade." *Washington Times*. January 12. and Klingner, Bruce. 2012. "The Missing Asia Pivot in Obama's Defense Strategy." Web Memo No. 3443. Heritage Foundation. January 6.

⁶ For an introduction to such views, see Barnes and Hodge, "Military Faces Historic Shift."

⁷ "China Slams New Asian Slant in US Defense Strategy." *AP English Worldstream - English*. January 9, 2012. For more calm and rational responses by the Chinese, see Ford, Peter. 2012. "China Stays Cool as New US Defense Strategy Targets Asia." *Christian Science Monitor*. January 6.

⁸ The White House. 2012. "Remarks by the President on the Defense Strategic Review." January 5.

<http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2012/01/05/remarks-president-defense-strategic-review>.

⁹ DSG. p. 6.

¹⁰ The White House. "Remarks."

¹¹ Panetta. "Statement on Defense Strategic Guidance."

¹² In fact, according to Panetta's recent comment, two combat brigades (6,000-8,000) of the U.S. Army stationed in Germany have already started to withdraw. "Secretary Panetta says Army is withdrawing 2 combat brigades



from Europe.” *Canadian Press*. January 12, 2012.

¹³ “No Change in the U.S. Commitment to South Korean Security Reconfirmed.” [Korean] *Yonhap News*. January 25, 2012.

¹⁴ Klingner. “Missing Asia Pivot.” p. 2.

¹⁵ In fact, an issue of U.S. force augmentation in case of another major Korean contingency was hotly debated in South Korea during the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan because the U.S. military experienced strains in dispatching and rotating its troops in conducting those wars. The doubt was somewhat exacerbated by the fact that a maximum level of the U.S. ground troops dispatched to Afghanistan was less than 200,000.

¹⁶ DSG. pp. 6-7.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Bumiller and Shanker. “Strategy.”

¹⁹ Panetta. 2011. “Speech delivered on Halifax International Security Forum.” November 18. Halifax, Nova Scotia.

<http://www.defense.gov/speeches/speech.aspx?speechid=1632>.

²⁰ Manyin, Mark E., Emma Chanlett-Avery, and Mary Beth Nikitin. 2011. *U.S.-South Korea Relations*. CRS Report. November 28. p. 20.

²¹ *Ibid.* p. 21.

²² Korea Ministry of Strategy and Finance. 2012. *The 20-year ROK-China Relations after Diplomatic Normalization: Economic Achievements and Lessons*. [Korean] January 27.

