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# Navigating the Blue Ocean: Strategy for the South Korean Navy

By Akito Nishiuchi

## I. INTRODUCTION

Since the Republic of Korea's establishment as a sovereign state in 1948, the Republic of Korea Army (ROKA) has served a crucial role. Even after the 1953 armistice that ended the Korean War, North Korea continued to make threats – such as the Blue House Raid in 1968 – which necessitated South Korea to have a strong army. It is not surprising, then, that South Korea primarily focused on building its army following the war, the prioritization that significantly influenced the country's domestic politics. From 1962 to 1993, the 30-year period during which South Korea experienced dramatic economic and social transformations, the country was led by three former ROK Army generals. Even after South Korea's democratization—symbolized by the Declaration on June, 29, 1987 by Roh Tae-woo and Kim Young-sam's succession in 1993—all of the chairmen of the Joint Chiefs of Staff came from the army with only one exception.

Historically, the army has been the strongest branch of the ROK military, with its troops accounting for 80 percent of all forces. Recently, however, there has been a move to strengthen the Republic of Korea Navy (ROKN). In 2005, the Roh Moo-hyun administration began an ambitious program to build a larger navy, including establishing the Maritime Task Flotilla and continuously deploying Aegis destroyers and larger submarines. In 2009, the navy dispatched a battleship far from its ROK homeport for the first time to the coast of Somalia to conduct an antipiracy operation. South Korean newspapers described these steps as transforming the ROKN into a “blue-water” navy (*Daeyang Haegun*).

This essay analyzes the factors that shaped the ROKN's new strategy and gauges whether this strategic trajectory will effectively enhance South Korea's national interests. It then examines South Korea's alliance with its neighboring countries and its specific effects on its naval strategy, as the expansion of the ROKN reflects South Korea's diplomatic relations.

## II. SANDWICHED SOUTH KOREA? THE ROKN'S VIEW OF NORTHEAST ASIA

South Korean newspapers have described South Korea as a country that is “sandwiched” between Japan and China. This expression has been used especially regarding technology and manufacturing industries, but has also been applied in the field of national defense. In 2007, according to an article from the *Chosun Ilbo*, when the South Korean minister of national defense met the director of the CIA, the minister argued that South Korea occupied a difficult position between Japan and China, which is a common view in South Korea.

This belief in the strength of Japan and China in fact legitimized and accelerated the ROK plan to build a larger navy. The very name of the ROKN's first amphibious assault ship—the *Dokdo*, acquired in 2007—highlights this concern about Japanese and Chinese military expansion. The ship is named after the disputed island between South Korea and Japan. As another example, a 2010 defense white paper by the ROK Ministry of National Defense stated that China and Japan are vying with each other to build up their navies and air forces. As of 2007, neither Japan nor China possessed ships larger than the *Dokdo*, and this powerful assault vessel was touted as a symbol of the ROKN's new horizons. In 2008, the *King Sejong the Great*, South Korea's first destroyer featuring the Aegis combat system, joined the ROKN fleet. South Korean newspapers reported that this Aegis destroyer was superior to existing Japanese destroyers. The ROKN fleet has become a point of pride for South Koreans, and the navy has enlisted public sentiment to strengthen its own status.

The ROKN expansion also reflects diplomatic reality and how South Korea was positioning itself in the region. During the Roh administration (2003–2008), the president argued that the country should play a key role in Northeast Asia as a “balancer.” Also during the Roh administration, South Korea's relationships with both the United States and Japan were in turmoil. The 2006 DPRK missile launch in July and nuclear test in October, and the reactions that followed, revealed that there was no mutual understanding in terms of security policy between South Korea and the United States and Japan. This context makes sense of the ambitious plan of the ROK Ministry of Defense—announced in 2005 and called the Defense Reform Basic Plan (DRP)—to change the characteristics and makeup of ROK forces by 2020.

Per the original DRP, the total number of soldiers would be reduced from 680,000 to 500,000, a drastic downsizing of the ROK army. Given the army's history of dominance within the overall military, this reduction would be

unprecedented. At the same time, the plan called for strengthening the navy and the air force with new technology and equipment. For the navy, plans were to acquire two more *Dokdo*-class ships and six Aegis destroyers as well as to expand the submarine fleet. With these additional vessels, the ROKN would organize its so-called Maritime Task Flotilla. The DRP clearly indicates the ROKN's ambitious transition from a coastal force to blue-water navy operating in ocean waters globally, far from domestic waters.

It is not obvious, however, how the Ministry of Defense is deploying this plan based on an analysis of potential threats to the country. For example, Aegis capability is not necessarily effective to thwart the asymmetric threat of North Korea (and Aegis destroyers are expensive—ROKN's *King Sejong the Great* cost more than one trillion won). From a United States Forces Korea (USFK) personnel in Seoul, I heard the argument that the navy's acquisition of an Aegis fleet could be a first step in ballistic missile defense (BMD) cooperation between South Korea, the United States, and Japan. In fact, Japan and the United States have built such a missile defense system in response to the DPRK threat, and the Aegis ships in the US and Japanese navies are a vital part of this system. The ROKN Aegis ships would share the same data-link system, so technically cooperation between the three navies would be relatively easy. However, since South Korea is closer to North Korea—compared to Japan, for example—such a BMD system would provide limited benefit for South Korea, which is in fact why the ROK government declined to join in the US and Japanese BMD system. For South Korea, the DPRK conventional forces along the Demilitarized Zone pose a greater threat.

Lack of such trilateral cooperation is also a legacy of the Roh administration, and it is unlikely that the ROK, US, and Japanese navies would have shared certain objectives. This makes the reasons for ROKN acquisition of Aegis capability unclear. When the first Aegis destroyer joined the ROKN in 2007, many South Korean newspapers emphasized that the ship would cause a dynamic change in the maritime order in the Northeast Asia. Then—chief of naval operations, Admiral Jung Ok-keun, expressed in 2008 in an article in *Defense News* that the ROKN had to “make strenuous efforts to modernize its fleet to not only deal with North Korea's threat, but also [to] counter emerging regional threats.” It is not surprising, then, that Japan's Ministry of Defense asked for clarification regarding the details and objectives of South Korea's defense reform plan. The difference between the DRP's evaluation of expected threats and the actual threats faced by the ROKN remains a controversial issue.

The DRP is controversial for another reason: cost. The plan assumes that the ROK military budget will increase an average of 9 percent each year. Total expenditure required until 2020 is 621 trillion won. Even after the International Monetary Fund (IMF) shock in 1997, during which the ROK government had to enforce austerity measures, including for the military budget, the annual increase in the military budget went from 5.3 percent (in 2000) to 11.4 percent (in 2005), so a 9 percent annual increase was not necessarily unrealistic. Additionally, the South Korean economy made a resilient recovery from the IMF shock. However, since military expenditure is only one part of the national budget, it is subject to the continued good performance of the entire South Korean economy. In light of this, estimates by the Rand Cooperation in Bruce Benet's "A Brief Analysis of the Republic of Korea's Defense Reform Plan 2005," cast doubt on the feasibility of the military budget increase stipulated in the DRP.

The DRP is indeed ambitious. The plan calls for transitioning the ROKN to a blue-water navy, but what that means in practice is unclear. One significant Democratic Party politician, who served as a minister during the Roh administration, told me that he was not sure what pursuing a blue-water navy really meant. An officer of the ROKN expressed outright cynicism, telling me that politicians liked the idea of blue-water navy and so they wanted to use the term even if it was not well defined. As evidenced by coverage in ROK newspapers, naval expansion has indeed been popular and arguably has satisfied the South Korean people's pride, especially because it signals a more significant role for the country in the international arena. After acquisition of the *King Sejong the Great*, the *Joongang Ilbo* conducted a survey of people's opinions of military expansion, and 72.1 percent of respondents had a positive impression. Building military capability, especially that of navy, captures people's attention. Nonetheless, since military expansion takes a lot of time and requires an enormous amount of money, its efficiency should be carefully analyzed. With the advent of the Lee Myung-bak administration, changes in South Korea's circumstances accelerated a revisiting of the DRP.

### **III. JEJUDO: KOREAN NAVY'S FURTHER STEP TO SOUTH**

The ROKN's expansion is reflected on the ground with its plans for a new base on Jeju Island (Jejudo). Jejudo is the southernmost island in South Korea, located in the East China Sea (or South Sea). The ROKN has naval bases around the Korean peninsula, such as in ports of Pyeongtaek, Jinhae, and Busan. But unlike these existing bases, the new one on Jejudo is farther afield from mainland South Korea, 100 kilometers distant, and thus reflects a new step for the ROKN.

The plan to build a naval base on Jeju was first raised in 1993. It was during the Roh administration in 2005, however, that substantial discussion and preparation took place. As if to symbolize President Roh's "balancer" argument, Jeju is located between Japan's Kyushu Island and China's east coast. Jeju is also close to Socotra Rock (in Korean: Ieodo), which is an epicenter of potential territorial dispute between South Korea and China. In addition, the strait between Jeju and the ROK mainland is the sea that the DPRK navy has to pass through when it moves vessels from its east to west coasts or vice versa. Jeju therefore has strategic value for South Korea.

The ROK Ministry of Defense plans to construct a new port on the island that can accommodate the newly organized Maritime Task Flotilla, with estimated completion in 2014. Resistance to building the base on Jeju is ongoing. However, because the successful opening of the military port is connected to the future of South Korea's blue-water navy—and is a litmus test for how serious the government is about such expansion—the development of Jeju's naval base is likely to continue.

#### **IV. THE CHEONGHAE UNIT: AN ECONOMIC SUPERPOWER AND ITS NAVY**

In the beginning of 2009, when I worked in Japan's Ministry of Defense, the ROKN was preparing to dispatch a battleship to escort commercial vessels in the waters off Somalia and to patrol the area for piracy. China had sent ships in December 2008, and both Japan and South Korea were about to send their own battleships, as if competing with each other. As a result, on March 13, just one day before the deployment of the Japanese destroyers, the ROK's so-called Cheonghae Unit, newly established for antipiracy measures, departed Busan. This unit consisted of one destroyer with one helicopter. This was the first time in ROKN history that military operations were conducted miles away from the Korean peninsula, and it was a milestone symbolizing the ROKN's transition to a blue-water navy.

In the years since 2009, some dramatic incidents have occurred, such as hostage rescues from pirates, which has given ROKN expansion a *raison d'être*. During the 1970s, the Middle East was not a security concern of South Korea. The ROK was a poor country desperate for foreign currency, and so many South Korean workers left to work and earn money under unfamiliar, harsh environment in the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) countries of the Middle East. Twenty years later, the Middle East has become a crucial area for the rapidly developing South Korean economy, which deeply depends on

foreign trade and Middle East oil. The presence of the ROKN forces in the Gulf of Aden for securing this economic lifeline demonstrates how South Korea and the ROKN came to play a key role in the international arena.

Pirates are traditionally regarded as the “enemy of all mankind,” and the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea gives countries the authority to fight piracy. For South Korea, the Gulf of Aden off of Somalia is a crucial sea lane that connects Europe and Asia. Now that South Korea heavily depends on foreign trade for its economic prosperity, it is not surprising that it perceives a military interest in improving the security of the area. There are also US, NATO and EU naval forces in the region, along with the Chinese, Japanese, and ROK navies.

The trilateral deployment of the Chinese, Japanese, and ROK navies has provided a unique opportunity for the three countries to pursue the same objective. Indeed, visits to each other’s ships have taken place. Not only on ceremonial level, but also on a substantial level, cooperation between the ROKN and the Japanese navy is ongoing. For example, a Japanese patrol aircraft shares its reconnaissance information with the ROKN ship, and in at least one instance the helicopter dispatched from the Japanese destroyer closely cooperated with the ROKN in order to deal with a suspected pirate vessel. An ROKN officer who participated in the Cheonghae Unit told me that during the operation off the coast of Somalia there were opportunities to meet with officers from the other countries, such that he was able to enhance mutual understandings.

The ROKN, Japan’s Maritime Self Defense Force, and China’s People’s Liberation Army Navy have also cooperated on escort missions, which enable commercial vessels to pass through dangerous areas safely. Needless to say, with limited forces, each navy cannot provide enough escorts for their own country’s ships. Therefore, many merchant vessels have been protected by foreign navies. Such cooperation in foreign waters might influence what is possible in home waters, where the interests of South Korea, Japan, and China are different from each other. But the countries are deeply connected to each other via trade. As economic powers that have an interest in securing sea transportation, South Korea, Japan, and China might share similar objectives. For the ROKN, the Cheonghae Unit could be a breakthrough for future cooperation.

## **V. COLLISIONS WITH THE DPRK AND THE REEVALUATION OF THE DRP**

On March 26, 2010, South Korea’s *Cheonan* sank in the Yellow Sea. Forty-six of the 104-member crew were killed. In May of that year, the Joint Civilian-Military

Investigation Group issued a report concluding that the sinking of *Cheonan* was caused by a DPRK torpedo attack. This incident had an enormous impact on the ROK navy and affected the fate of the defense reform plan. The ROKN was criticized for its inability to conduct antisubmarine operations. For example, Michael Finnegan, senior research associate at the National Bureau of Asian Research, argued in a 2010 article in the *JoongAng Ilbo* that the ROKN should immediately enhance antisubmarine warfare capability instead of purchasing expensive Aegis destroyers.

During the aftermath of the *Cheonan* incident, Kim Dong-sung, a Grand National Party member who sits on the National Assembly's Defense Committee, criticized the branches of the ROK military for each seeking to maximize its own share of the defense budget. This made each service claim to need cutting-edge weaponry, without consideration of actual requirements; fancy and new weaponry, such as Aegis capability and *Dokdo*-class ships, can easily capture politicians' attention. As a result, the relatively simple step of improving the navy's sonar system was not prioritized. In this way, the *Cheonan* incident provoked criticism that the ROKN had prioritized purchasing large and expensive vessels based on the logic of bureaucracy rather than military reality.

Even prior to the *Cheonan* incident the defense reform plan faced another challenge: increasing military spending by an unprecedented 9 percent a year. Since the 1980s, as the South Korean economy underwent economic growth, the defense share of gross domestic product (GDP) had declined. In 1981, the defense budget was 5.54 percent of GDP, a relatively high percentage that is not surprising given the Cold War context and the ongoing DPRK threat, such as the later 1983 Rangoon bombing. As South Korea became affluent, the defense percentage of GDP plunged. In 2002, when Roh Moo-hyun won the presidential election, the figure was at its lowest, at 2.39 percent. However, under the Roh administration this trend reversed, with defense spending reaching 2.79 percent in 2009. This fluctuation indicates that the increase of military spending per GDP caused a big shift from its long-term trend.

The worldwide economic downturn of 2008 also hit South Korea. Although the ROK economy suffered relatively limited damage and showed rapid recovery compared to other developed economies, the DRP had to be reconsidered. For President Lee Myung-bak, who had positioned himself as "CEO President" during the 2007 presidential campaign, the expanding military expenditure had to be reevaluated. The annual increase in the defense budget was lowered, from 7.1 percent in 2009 to 3.6 percent in 2010, which meant that the DRP faced a

serious shortfall in funding. Indeed, the *King Sejong the Great* was unable to fully stock its arsenal. Similarly, the *Dokdo* was unable to operate with a full regiment of helicopters. Such limitations have the potential to substantially undermine the capability and strategic value of the ships.

The DRP was officially revised in 2009. The target year for full implementation was extended from 2020 to 2025. The proposed number of future Aegis destroyers was reduced from six to three. And the acquisition of the next *Dokdo*-class ship was postponed for the time being. In this way, the DRP revision downsized the ambitious plan of building a larger navy, reflecting the reality of budget constraints. There might be another revision of the DRP in the near future. However, as of 2012, this downsized DRP will navigate the ROKN to the next stage.

## **VI. CONCLUSION**

There are multiple issues surrounding both the idea of an ROK blue-water navy and its potential and implications for foreign policy. First, the idea can be attributed to a mixture of ideology and national pride. The Roh administration had as an ideal the pursuit of a more independent national defense. President Roh did not consider building closer relationships with countries such as the United States and Japan. Rather he dreamed to position South Korea as a “balancer” between Japan and China. South Korea had to expand its navy if the United States and Japan were not worth trusting. The change of diplomatic relations that occurred with the Lee administration encouraged revision of the ROK defense plan, which in turn has changed the trajectory of the ROKN.

Second, the reasons for a blue-water navy can be seen as a resulting from South Korea’s increasing economic power and the larger presence of the country in global politics. But neither the *Dokdo* assault ship nor the *King Sejong the Great* participated in the Cheonghae Unit that was sent to the coast of Somalia, in part because these ships’ advantages are not required to conduct escorting mission of commercial vessels; this indicates that the practical needs of a blue-water navy conflict with what people and politicians want to see. Smaller destroyers are enough to thwart pirates. However, these smaller ships do not tend to excite politicians and the general public. The more near-to-hand DPRK threat should also not be underestimated. The ROKN is tasked with finding a way to meet the demands of being both a functional navy of an economic power and a navy that South Koreans can take pride in.

Third, as the Cheonghae Unit showed, the ROKN can potentially play a larger role in the international arena and thereby build closer relationships with other navies, especially Japan's. Because of the countries' historical backgrounds and past disputes, there are many hurdles to cooperation between South Korea and Japan. But as the 2009 revision of the ROK defense plan indicates, it could be a burden for South Korea to continue building a large navy, suggesting instead a future dependence on Japan and US navies for regional security. South Korea must keep its economy in good shape so the ROKN should pursue building its power in a smart way, not simply to satisfy national pride.



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