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A Civilian Perspective on Defense Transparency in the Republic of Korea: The More, the Better?

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Summary

In a change from the past, the government of the Republic of Korea now emphasizes communication with domestic as well as external audiences. However, practices during past military authoritarian regimes have left a lasting, negative impression on the public. As a result, the government still suffers from a credibility gap, making it difficult to gain support at home for its defense policies. The government may need to rethink the methods and content of its communications on defense in the face of continued demands for more detailed and timely information.

Views and ideas in this paper are solely those of the author. They do not represent those of the ROK government.

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DEMOCRATIZATION AND TRANSPARENCY

As a divided country that has endured war and constant threat of attack from North Korea for the past 60 years, it is natural, maybe inevitable, that the Republic of Korea (ROK) places national security concerns at the top of its priorities. However, during the military authoritarian regime period (1960s to 1980s), these national security considerations were used for domestic political purposes. People's right to know and freedom of speech were often suppressed on national security grounds and almost everything could be justified by national security concerns. If someone argued for transparency in security-military affairs, that person could be easily considered as an enemy agent. Very few people demanded the disclosure of information, especially concerning military and security affairs, since they were afraid of being charged with espionage or having their demands exploited for political purposes by the government. Consequently, defense transparency was an alien concept, or taboo, for most South Koreans before the 1990s.

With democratization, as a symbol of citizens' rights, demand for information has substantially increased and access to information has also become easier. Thus more information is available nowadays. We can say that defense transparency is closely associated with the nature of political system.

However, practices during past military authoritarian regimes have left a lasting, negative impression on the public. As a result, the government still suffers from a credibility gap. Even now, South Koreans tend to not fully trust the information provided by the government. They easily become suspicious and have a tendency to subscribe to conspiracy theories.

The ROK government has learned lessons from past practices and recognized the necessity of information disclosure. To get public support for defense policies, it is essential for the government to be transparent as far as it can be and to communicate with the public—strategic communication with domestic audiences, especially opinion leaders. And the majority of people see

the necessity and desirability of transparency on defense policies in general. Consequently, the absolute level of transparency has increased over the years.

However, there is also a split among the public over the disclosure of information, especially on security and military matters. Progressives and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) demand a very high level of information and transparency about decision-making processes, whereas, due to the security environment on the Korean Peninsula, conservatives emphasize the necessity of keeping sensitive information closed to the public. The two sides cannot agree on what kind of information and to what level information should be open to the public. This is a kind of ideological conflict between the two schools. The progressives criticize the conservatives for being anti-democratic, anti-people, and anti-unification, whereas the conservatives criticize the progressives for being pro-North Korea and thus undermining the national security of South Korea by exploiting/fabricating information for their own political purposes. It seems unlikely that these two extremes will be reconciled in near future.

THE SECURITY ENVIRONMENT AND TRANSPARENCY

Another factor that enables a country to become more transparent in the defense and military fields is change in its security environment. Meaningful improvements in its external security environment make a country feel secure and confident, and changes in threat perception allow it to disclose more information. South Korea is no exception.

In the early 1990s, the two Koreas held a series of talks and produced several important agreements, including the Basic Agreement and the Joint Declaration of Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. Disclosure of information became a hot issue since South and North Korea discussed confidence-building measures that included information exchange. The hopeful mood allowed the government to be more flexible and easy regarding information disclosure. And also, before exchanging information with its counterpart in the North, it was necessary for the ROK government

to become more transparent on defense to experts and domestic audiences.¹

The combination of democratization and improvement in the external security environment has made it possible for the government to become more transparent in defense-military affairs. Greater access to defense information has become available. While the absolute level of defense transparency has been enhanced, there is still a discrepancy between the government and what the public and NGOs want regarding the level and scope of information disclosure. While the South Korean government, especially the Ministry of National Defense, has become more concerned with and recognized the importance of public relations, it still feels the need to keep some information closed to the public, despite a very strong demand from progressive NGOs. The NGOs argue that the people have a right to know in almost every category of defense information whenever they feel it warranted: budget, acquisition and procurement, manpower, force structure, decision-making process, and so on. It seems that these NGOs are pursuing absolute transparency—which may be infeasible in reality—and that anything short of that is not satisfactory. They are never satisfied with what they are given by the government.

INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY AND TRANSPARENCY

The trend toward more transparency is further facilitated by the advancement of information and communication technology. With the development of information and communication technology and services, the community of interest in policy has expanded. To communicate with the additional actors in this ever-expanding community effectively, the South Korean government

1. The first defense white paper of the ROK was published in 1966. The second one was released in 1968. Then, due to the worsening security situation on the Korean Peninsula caused by a series of North Korean provocations, the ROK government stopped publication for almost 20 years. With the improvement of the security environment in the late 1980s, the ROK government resumed publication in 1988.

has had to become much more transparent. Traditionally, each ROK ministry has had an advisory board composed of opinion leaders, scholars, and experts. This is no longer adequate; thus, the government is using new and diverse ways of communicating with the public.

The ROK government has felt the necessity to compete with non-governmental sources of information. Many NGOs post their own version of events and incidents on their websites. Often they relay information faster than government sources, as we have witnessed in several cases in recent years, including the death of two schoolgirls in 2002, the *Cheonan* incident, and the Yeonpyong Island shelling. These incidents have proven the importance of timely information and transparency in security-military affairs. If the government failed to provide accurate information in a timely fashion through established channels, it would lose public support and it would suffer substantially.

To summarize, the development in information and communication technology and the expansion of the public and policy communities through the Internet and social networking tools have forced the South Korean government to become more transparent since the general public is demanding a higher level of transparency in policy-making processes and defense information. Nowadays, there are more diverse ways available for the public to get the information they want. More sources of information are available, but it is difficult to judge the reliability of information each source provides. Due to past experience during the military authoritarian regimes, some people still raise questions about the information released by the government.

A CIVILIAN PERSPECTIVE ON ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS OF DEFENSE TRANSPARENCY

We can look at two types of information: policy-relevant information (or the government position on specific policy issues) and defense establishment-relevant information (actual numbers and figures). As was mentioned previously, the policy debate has become quite active in recent years and

centers upon two things: general policy orientation² and the decision-making process.

The debate over general policy orientation and/or specific issues never stops and gets more intense as the policy community expands and more actors are involved. To promote healthy debate over specific issues and to mobilize support, the government is obliged to become more transparent by disclosing relevant information. However, there is always suspicion and doubt being raised by the NGOs since there are many sources of information other than the government. They believe that the policy orientation of the government dictates what information is shared. The issue of reliability of information goes hand in hand with the transparency issue. Consequently, not only the scope and level of information itself but also the process of decision-making comes under the debate.

The second type of information is the hard data of the defense establishment or posture: defense budget; troop size (or manpower); types and numbers of weapons systems; organizational structure and deployment; exercises, training, and maneuvers (either independent or combined); procurement/acquisition programs; research and development plans; and overseas activities. Over the years, the availability and transparency of the information about the defense posture of the ROK has substantially improved at the aggregate level. But, unfortunately, the details are still withheld and the confidentiality of some information is still deemed necessary despite the progressive NGOs' demand for disclosure. It seems that the government discloses the information based on its own judgment, rather than through an established set of criteria. Even the legislative body has limited access to sensitive information. On the other hand, the NGOs tend to demand the disclosure of information in almost all areas: that is, the more, the better. Despite the progress made over the past couple of decades, access to defense information is still limited and transparency is also limited in depth.

From a civilian perspective, the overall transparency of defense information has improved sub-

2. This may include information regarding the use of forces: that is, strategies, doctrines, operational plans, and tactics. Some parts of this are more sensitive than other parts.

stantially at aggregate level, but the details are not widely available. The policy explanation is relatively good, whereas the explanation and data on defense posture need to be further improved. In addition, there is some improvement of the correlation between policy and hard data since the policy should be based on hard data rather than rhetoric or narratives.

SOURCES OF INFORMATION AND RELIABILITY

Nowadays, the public has various ways get the information it wants since there are many sources of information available, not only the government sources such as defense white papers,³ reports, official websites, press releases and briefings, and hearings at the National Assembly, but also non-government sources such as NGOs, private blogs and websites of civilian groups or research institutes, and overseas websites.

Young people usually go to the Internet for their information rather than check the information in print, and they seem to prefer private websites over government websites. Sometimes private websites or power bloggers provide more diverse information than the government websites.

Reports or statements at hearings in the National Assembly are another source of information. They tend to carry information that is not usually available to the public. Sometimes, despite the sensitivity or classification of information, some members of National Assembly reveal what they have discovered or heard to the media and public.⁴

Consequently, to compete against private websites, the government is trying to improve its websites. However, it is still reluctant to reveal the information some experts and/or the public wants. And official communications tend to fall behind the private sector in terms of timing and scope of release of information. Some experts have opportunities to acquire information if they are a member of advisory board under the security clearance

3. The Ministry of National Defense publishes defense white papers every other year, but it does not publish any other document for public use. So people tend to go private websites for information.

4. Each ministry and each branch of the armed services has its own advisory board.

code, but they cannot disclose the information.

The contents of defense white papers have improved substantially over time. The policy explanations are relatively good, whereas actual data and details on operations are still limited. They just focus on general direction and rough figures. Despite all the efforts of the government there is still a long way to go.

The Defense Committee of the National Assembly is another place for communication and policy debate. Members and their assistants have better access to the information and the government must reply to the questions and requests.⁵ But sometimes the government can deny access by claiming that requested information is sensitive. So it turns out to be policy debate rather than communication. Some publications are available but very limited. So nowadays most people rely on online channels of communication for information.

To sum up, although the government seems very much concerned with public affairs and tries to enhance general public understanding of and support for the government's policies, it faces much competition from outside sources. The government relies on its official website and press releases and briefings, but it has two problems: timing (too late) and scope of information (too little). The public tends to go to alternative sources of information and controversy over the accuracy of that information usually follows.

5. There are two venues for raising questions: 1) at a committee meeting; 2) at a plenary session.

CONCLUSION

In a change from the past, the ROK government now emphasizes communication with domestic as well as external audiences. South Korea has become a very open and information-based society, which means transparency in defense information carries more weight than ever before. At this time, however, the South Korean government is emphasizing the methods of conveying information over the content. Unfortunately, the methods themselves sometimes cannot compete with non-governmental sources of information. Second, in defending the government's position on specific issues, the government tends to be defensive rather than proactive in its communications. Third, the government still tends to be reluctant to accept the concept of an inclusive policy community.

Addressing these challenges should be taken into account to increase the credibility and reliability of the government in formulating and executing its security policies.

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