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The Republic of Korea's Perspective on Defense Transparency

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SUMMARY

The Republic of Korea has greatly enhanced defense transparency both domestically and internationally since the end of the 1990s, using a mix of strategies. However, the efforts of the current administration to enhance defense transparency at the international level do not match efforts at home. Some experts believe that the ROK is already on par with other nations and that its neighbors should reciprocate by shedding more light on their own defense policies and practices.

INTRODUCTION

There are two standing issues concerning defense transparency in the case of the Republic of Korea (ROK). One is to seek public understanding of defense policy and the defense budget. The other is to relieve tensions with neighboring countries.

Since the ROK has become more democratized since the 1990s, the government has prevented the military's intervention in politics and taken measures to reduce in-

The Defense Transparency Project is a project of the University of California Institute on Global Conflict and Cooperation. DTP Policy Briefs provide analysis and recommendations based on the work of project participants. Author's views are their own.

vestment in the defense arena. When Kim Young Sam, the first civilian president in more than three decades, took office in 1993, his administration eliminated factions within the military, investigated corruption in defense acquisition, and promoted transparency in defense spending. The National Assembly and independent press act and report on incidents and corruption related to the military—without exception. Through these processes, defense transparency has been greatly enhanced from the domestic perspective.

As well, there is an ongoing effort to seek international transparency in order to relieve tension with neighboring countries. Since the end of the Cold War, Korea has increasingly paid attention to international matters that are taking place within and beyond the Korean Peninsula. There has been increased interest in the military power of neighboring countries. In particular, after German unification in 1989, the ROK political leadership has recognized the need for international cooperation in security matters. Accordingly, the Korean government seeks cooperation from neighboring nations through more transparent policies, and its starting point is the publication of defense white papers. The ROK has published defense white paper since 1967, but the contents have been greatly enhanced since the end of Cold War. The English versions of the ROK's defense white papers, distributed worldwide, describe Korea's perception of its security threats, its defense policy, guidance for defense power enhancement, and defense culture in detail.

THE ROK'S POSITION

Efforts to Enhance Defense Transparency at the Domestic Level

The ROK uses several strategies to enhance defense transparency at home. First, the Ministry of National Defense (MND) provides information to the public through the home page of its website. The MND home page introduces defense policy to the public through its posting of MND organization charts, defense news, and key policy papers. In particular, the MND makes a constant effort to inform the public of its support for civilians and seeks public input through the "Participation

Plaza," a Q/A section to address public concerns about defense. In addition, the MND provides defense news to 3,000 civilian experts and retired officers through Public Customer Relationship Management (PCRM).

Second, the MND holds regular twice-a-day press briefings to explain the defense issues of the day. The constant media monitoring is the best way to enhance defense transparency. Given that the ROK confronts North Korea militarily, it classifies much of its defense information as national secrets. Nevertheless, the enhance the quality defense transparency by making media monitoring possible. The spokesperson answers questions that are submitted in advance, explains issues to the public, and holds Q/A sessions. Through these briefings, the MND tries to ensure that the public gets defense-related news in a timely fashion. In addition to these briefings, the MND publishes the Korea Defense Daily, which provides defense news to active and retired servicemen and civilian experts.

Third, the defense white paper, which is published every two years, is the most important publication that provides a comprehensive explanation of defense policy to the public. In the year before publication, the MND asks for expert input from Korean think tanks to improve the quality of the next white paper. Through these efforts, the MND ensures that the materials in defense white paper are well-received by the public.

Finally, the National Assembly plays a very important role in promoting defense transparency through both its annual inspection and its budget deliberations. The inspection, which takes place soon after September 10 each year, lasts for 20 days. During the inspection period, the National Assembly can review a whole range of defense policy issues, and the MND must provide materials requested by the National Assembly requests. The National Assembly can also launch an independent investigation if serious wrongdoings are found in defense management. Unlike the annual inspection, the launch of an investigation needs the support of 25 percent of National Assembly members. Once launched, the investigation proceeds in a manner very similar to the inspection. Budget deliberations greatly enhance defense

transparency. The National Assembly receives additional information on defense management in the budget deliberation process.

Efforts to Promote Defense Transparency at the International Level

There are several initiatives underway at the international level. First, the MND provides an English version of its home page. Regrettably, the contents of English home page are lacking in comparison with the Korean home page because of language bottlenecks. The amount of content on the English home page is less than half that of the Korean page. Nevertheless, the English home page provides defense-related news and information on defense policy. There is also a Q/A section to answer questions coming from the international community.

Second, the publication of the ROK's defense white paper in English helps promote defense transparency at the international level. The MND publishes 5,000 copies in English and sends them to 120 nations. The contents of the defense white papers published in English are almost identical to those of the defense white papers published in Korean.

Third, the MND is pursuing international PCRMs through the Korean Institute for Defense Analyses (KIDA). Unlike the domestic PCRMs publication, international PCRMs are published less frequently. However, international PCRMs contain important materials on defense policy and is published in English and Japanese. It is sent to legislators, legislative staff, and security experts in United States and Japan twice a month.

THE LEE ADMINISTRATION'S EFFORTS TO ENHANCE TRANSPARENCY

Domestic Efforts

The ROK's defense transparency has been continuously improved under the current government of Lee Myong Bak. In providing defense-related information to meet public demand, the Korean government also enhances cooperation with the international community. The current adminis-

tration is also making efforts to enhance defense transparency by proclaiming "defense for people" as a basis for its policies. Under this slogan, the government is trying to provide more information to the public and to seek public support. As a result, the overall information on defense budget, manpower, management, and policy is open to the public. By releasing critical information on budget and contracts, defense transparency has been greatly enhanced.

The sinking of naval vessel *Cheonan* and the shelling on Yeonpyong Island clearly demonstrate how much progress has been made on defense transparency in the ROK. In the *Cheonan* incident, there was huge public interest in the operational details of what happened. As a result, detailed information on the operational situation and movements of neighboring military units was released, to the point that there was concern that potentially damaging classified information might have been released. In the Yeonpyong shelling incident, details on how military reinforcements were sent to the affected area were made public in order to meet public interest but, again, the amount of detail raised concerns that North Korea might take advantage of the military information.

International Efforts

The Lee administration has set "Global Korea" as a part of the national agenda and has paid much attention to international cooperation. The defense arena is no exception. However, frankly speaking, the effort to enhance defense transparency at international level does not match the effort at home. This is probably because the ROK government believes that its defense transparency is already at the same level as neighboring nations. Since there is no official comment of the ROK government on defense transparency, I asked KIDA's regional experts for their thoughts. As the table below indicates, most KIDA specialists believe that Korea's defense transparency is comparable to international standards.

KIDA experts assess that the ROK has achieved a high level of defense transparency that meets international standards. The ROK in particular publishes the densest defense white paper in the world, and discloses extensive information

Table 1. Comparison of Defense Transparency: A Korean Perspective

The United States: Good

Area	Assessment	Reasoning
White paper	Similar	No defense white paper. However, various policy papers (including QDR) are published
Home page	Similar/deficient	Homepage composition is complex, but content is excellent
Budget transparency	Good	Information disclosure is excellent
Legislative inspection	Good	High level of legislative scrutiny through issue-oriented committee activities
Disclosure to media	Good	DOD conducts daily, weekly press briefings
International cooperation	Good	The United States leads on various kinds of international cooperation

Japan: Similar to Korea

Area	Assessment	Reasoning
White paper	Similar	Defense white paper is published. Excellent content.
Home page	Good	Systematically discloses budget, equipment, size of military forces.
Budget transparency	Similar	Budget is disclosed by item
Legislative inspection	Similar	The level of legislative scrutiny is similar to ROK
Disclosure to media	Deficient	There is no regular press briefing
International cooperation	Similar	Japan is looking to expand international cooperation

China: Deficient

Area	Assessment	Reasoning
White paper	Deficient	Details are lacking despite white paper publication
Home page	Deficient	Detailed information is lacking on the home page
Budget transparency	Deficient	It is difficult to determine budget on item basis
Legislative inspection	Deficient	Legislative scrutiny is limited as the PLA reports to the Communist Party
Disclosure to media	Deficient	Difficult to make assessment, but general perception is poor
International cooperation	Good	China is expanding cooperation with Central Asia

Russia: Deficient

Area	Assessment	Reasoning
White paper	Deficient	No defense white paper
Home page	Similar	Contains defense-related materials
Budget transparency	Deficient	It is difficult to determine budget on item basis
Legislative inspection	Deficient	Difficult to make assessment, but general perception is poor
Disclosure to media	Deficient	Disclosure of information to media is deficient
International cooperation	Good	Russia is trying to expand international cooperation

North Korea: Severely deficient

Area	Assessment	Reasoning
White paper	Deficient	No defense white paper
Home page	Severely deficient	No home page
Budget transparency	Severely deficient	Difficult to determine overall budget
Legislative inspection	Severely deficient	Authoritarian dictatorship, military-first policy
Disclosure to media	Severely deficient	Absence of press freedom
International cooperation	Deficient	Very limited exchange

on various areas including on policy, budget, and defense management. Considering that the ROK is looking forward to exchanging more information with neighboring nations, there should be more personnel exchange, information release, and training disclosure.

CONCLUSION

The ROK has greatly enhanced defense transparency in order to seek public support at home and promote international cooperation. This enhanced defense transparency will contribute to peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula and in Northeast Asia in the future.

Other countries in the region should make greater efforts to enhance defense transparency based upon “reciprocity.” In this regard, I propose the development and mutual application of a defense transparency model. If the model outlines the materials that defense white papers should discuss, and nations publish defense white paper in accordance with the model, states can prevent the problems that discrepancies in the quality and

quantity of information provided in each nation’s defense white paper create. And if reciprocity spreads, it will help to build trust among nations.

In principle, there should be governmental efforts to establish such a transparency model. However, if nations do not act, scholars can identify key areas that must be included in the model and make recommendations to their governments. By presenting national perceptions of military threats, strategies toward perceived threats, policy guidance for strategy, and information on military power building, scholars can indirectly pressure nations to follow. Of course, it is not an easy task but will be a good path in preventing regional conflict and building trust.

Beomchul SHIN is currently a director of the Division of North Korean Military Studies at the Korea Institute for Defense Analyses. He holds various advisory posts, including the advisory board of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, Trade, and Unification to National Assembly. He has published books and articles on international law and conflicts, the ROK–U.S. alliance, and North Korean issues.