

Republic of Korea: Meeting the Challenge of Transnational Threats in the Twenty-first Century

Steven Kim

Key Findings

- Due to the changing nature of security threats in the post–Cold War period, the Korean government has developed a more expansive concept of security to take into account the confluence of traditional and nontraditional threat elements characterizing Korea’s security environment.
- The Korean government’s desire not to passively follow but to actively lead efforts in promoting international security reflects its growing aspiration to become a global player—Global Korea—commensurate with its national power and international status.
- Given the high threat perception of terrorism, the Korean government has recognized the need for comprehensive and systematic counterterrorism efforts not only at the domestic but also at the global level.
- Korea’s participation in multilateral naval operations to suppress piracy is a manifestation of its desire to assume greater responsibility for maintaining international peace and safety.
- The Korean government has taken aggressive steps to prevent transshipment of drugs through its borders and domestic export of precursor chemicals.
- President Lee has taken a visible and proactive stance in addressing the problem of climate change through major, new initiatives in the domestic and international arena.
- By agreeing to elevate the ROK-US alliance to a strategic partnership based on common values, the Lee Myung-bak administration has broadened the scope of bilateral cooperation with the United States to include countering transnational threats at the regional and global levels.

- By playing a global role in addressing transnational threats commensurate with its national power, Korea believes that what it is doing is good for the international community and, ultimately, good for Korea in enhancing its capacity to deal with future challenges.

With the end of the Cold War, the security challenges facing South Korea have not abated but have, in fact, increased in complexity and scope. While many countries have reaped the peace dividend from the end of the East-West conflict, the Korean Peninsula remains a security flash point, with North and South Korea still bitterly divided and locked in a military standoff along the most heavily fortified border in the world—the Demilitarized Zone. With the Korean War still unresolved in the Korean Peninsula, the dangerous stalemate has been exacerbated by the ongoing development of nuclear arms program by North Korea. The controversy over the program first emerged in the early 1990s (first nuclear crisis) only to subside temporarily with the signing of the Agreed Framework in 1994 before reemerging in 2002 (second nuclear crisis) as the most pressing regional security problem in the post–Cold War period.

While North Korea has defended its nuclear program on the basis of protecting its national sovereignty and security, South Korea and regional powers such as the United States, China, Russia, and Japan have been united in their opposition to the program as destabilizing and undermining regional peace and security. Despite ongoing efforts to find a lasting solution to the North Korean nuclear problem, it remains an intractable issue. With North Korea carrying out further nuclear and missile tests in the first half of 2009, tensions continue to remain high on the Korean Peninsula. Therefore, even with the end of the Cold War, the Korean government has continued to focus on the traditional military threat from North Korea.

However, due to fundamental changes in the international security environment in the post–Cold War period, Korean policymakers have gradually expanded their threat perception to include security challenges that do not conform to conventional criteria of a military threat—namely nontraditional or transnational threats. In fact, the government has come to recognize that Korea now faces new security challenges to the safety and welfare of its citizens such as terrorism, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), natural disasters, piracy, international organized crime, and cyber-crime. Because these new threats are not only growing

but also are diversifying rapidly due to globalization and advances in information technology, they have accentuated the already high level of uncertainty surrounding Korea's security environment. The changing nature of security threats in the post-Cold War period, therefore, has prompted the Korean government to develop a more expansive concept of security to take into account the confluence of traditional and non-traditional threat elements characterizing Korea's security environment.

The expanded threat perception of the government also is reflected in the Korean public at large. In a public opinion poll conducted in South Korea, the Korean public identified not only traditional but also non-traditional security challenges as "critical threats" to their country's vital interests. Among the nontraditional threats, the public cited international terrorism (61 percent), potential epidemics (51 percent), and global warming (48 percent). As for traditional threats, the public identified "North Korea becoming a nuclear power" (59 percent), "the rise of Japanese military power" (47 percent), and "development of China as a world power" (46 percent) as critical threats.¹ Therefore, the Korean public's perception of the top two threats—one traditional and the other nontraditional—reflects a broad societal consensus on the importance of both types of threats to ROK security.

The government has begun to develop a comprehensive security posture to effectively respond to an increasingly wider spectrum of threats to Korean security. First, the government seeks to enhance the capabilities of its armed forces by creating a more technology-intensive and information-centric military. The advanced capabilities will enable the military not only to defend Korea from a military threat on the Korean Peninsula, but also to respond with greater flexibility and efficiency to diverse threats as they evolve from the rapidly changing international security environment. To further ensure the effectiveness of the military in responding to varied threats, the government has begun to reorganize the force structure by establishing specific military units with the requisite staff and equipment to deal with transnational and non-traditional threats during peacetime.

Second, the government has developed a "whole of government" approach to responding to national contingencies such as terrorism and large-scale natural disasters by integrating the crisis-response capabilities of its civilian and military sectors through interagency coordination. The coordinated response by the whole of government is necessary, since not all threats can be addressed solely by military means. The government,

moreover, has passed or revised legislation to provide the legal basis for interagency coordination such as the Terrorism Prevention Law and the integrated Civil Defense Law.

Lastly, since transnational threats by their nature cannot be effectively addressed by the efforts of any one nation, the Korean government has committed itself to working bilaterally and multilaterally with other countries. As its most important bilateral partner, the Korean government has agreed with the United States to transform their alliance relationship—which traditionally focused on deterring North Korea—into a future-oriented, strategic relationship equipped to deal with global threats such as terrorism, WMD proliferation, piracy, organized crime and narcotics, climate change, and epidemic diseases. The Korean government also intends to take a leadership role in multilateral organizations such as the United Nations, the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), the Association of Southeast Asian Nations Plus Three (ASEAN+3), the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), and the East Asia Summit (EAS) to promote greater dialogue and cooperation in addressing the new security challenges of the twenty-first century. The Korean government's desire not to passively follow but to actively lead efforts in promoting international security reflects its growing aspiration to become a global player—Global Korea—commensurate with its national power and international status.

Terrorism

Terrorism is perceived not only by the public but also by the ROK government to be the most important transnational threat facing Korea. South Korea has been no stranger to terrorism and since 1958 has suffered from many terrorism-related events involving bombings, shootings, hijacking, and kidnappings of its citizens. Prior to 1990, almost all of the terrorist-related events occurred inside the country and were carried out by the North Korean regime. Since 1990, however, most of the terrorist attacks against South Korean citizens—including diplomats, businessmen, and tourists—have occurred abroad such as in Iraq, Afghanistan, Nigeria, Somalia, and Yemen and have been carried out by international terrorist organizations.

Since 9/11, there have been four high-profile incidents that have heightened public awareness and concern over terrorism as a security threat. In May 2004, a Korean contractor was kidnapped and later gruesomely executed by an Islamist group who claimed that the killing

was in response to South Korea's plans to send three thousand troops to participate in the US-led military operation in Iraq. In February 2007, a Korean soldier was killed in a suicide bomb attack at the US Bagram Air Base in Afghanistan. Then, five months later in July 2007, twenty-three Korean Christian volunteers in Afghanistan were kidnapped by the Taliban, who demanded the withdrawal of South Korean military personnel from Afghanistan. After the killing of two male Korean hostages, the Korean government was able to secure the release of the rest of the hostages by promising to withdraw the Korean military personnel from Afghanistan once their mandate expired in 2007. The latest terrorist incident occurred in March 2009 when, for the first time, four Korean tourists were killed by a suicide bomber linked to an Al-Qaeda terrorist group in Yemen. A few days later, the Korean government officials who went to Yemen to investigate the incident were attacked by another suicide bomber but escaped without casualties. With thirteen million Koreans traveling overseas annually, South Korean businesses expanding their operations abroad, and Korean troops being dispatched to foreign countries, terrorist attacks against Koreans are likely to increase in the future.

While there has been no domestic terrorist attack by international terrorist organizations, the possibility of such an attack occurring cannot be ruled out when considering Korea's alliance relationship with the United States and its involvement in US-led overseas military operations, the presence of US military installations and personnel in the country, and Korea's hosting of major international events. The vulnerability to an international terrorist attack in Korea is highlighted by the fact that from 2004–08, the ROK government arrested seventy-four foreigners, mostly Muslims from South Asia or Southeast Asia, as terrorism suspects. Many of the suspects were found to have been involved in collecting information on US military forces in South Korea or planning terror attacks on non-Koreans. Some Arabs who have been caught were involved in criminal activities to provide funding for terrorist activity. The suspects arrested by the Korean government were expelled and sent back to their home countries to face legal prosecution.

Given the high threat perception of terrorism, the Korean government has recognized the need for comprehensive and systematic counterterrorism efforts not only at the domestic but also at the global level. First, it has sought to strengthen its domestic counterterrorism capacity by consolidating its domestic legal arrangements and the national

emergency response system. The South Korean government first established guidelines for countering terrorism in response to the terrorist attack during the 1972 Munich Olympic Games and North Korean terrorist attacks in the 1980s. But it was only after South Korea was chosen to host the 1988 Olympic Games that the government created a national system of emergency management for terrorism-related events with the passage of the Presidential Order for Counterterrorism of 1982. The original law was amended in its entirety in 2005 to better respond to large-scale, unconventional terrorist events in the wake of the 9/11 World Trade Center and the US anthrax letter attacks in 2001. The law was further revised in 2008.

The efficiency of the national emergency response system in conducting anti-terrorism operations has been improved through the creation of a unified system of command and inter-agency cooperation. The Korean government also has begun issuing e-passports to protect the identity of lawful travelers and prevent the use of fake passports by terrorists. The government, moreover, has passed the Anti-Terrorist Financing legislation to curb money laundering by terrorist organizations, either in or through the country. But, it has yet to pass a comprehensive anti-terrorism bill, which has been pending in the National Assembly for years. Although the bill would provide a solid legal basis for government-led efforts to curb terrorism, human rights activists have raised concerns about the possibility of granting excessive power to the state intelligence agency, which may lead to violation of the right to privacy and other civil liberties.

Fully aware that comprehensive and systematic counterterrorism efforts are indispensable at the global level, the Korean government also has been active both bilaterally and multilaterally in promoting counterterrorism efforts. With increasing numbers of Koreans working, traveling, and living abroad, the government is strengthening cooperation with antiterrorism authorities in various countries where Korean nationals are vulnerable to terrorism. In addition, the ROK has held consultative meetings with twenty countries and international organizations from various regions to exchange information and expertise, to discuss measures for counterterrorism capacity-building and technical support, and for cooperation in case of a terrorist incident. The Korean government also has signed twenty-four extradition treaties and nineteen mutual legal assistance treaties with various foreign governments to expedite and support cross border counterterrorist investigations and prosecution. As

part of its efforts to join the Visa Waiver program, South Korea also has agreed on a mechanism to exchange terrorist screening information with Washington.

The Korean government also has vigorously supported the efforts of the United Nations and regional organizations, including APEC and ARF, to strengthen international cooperation in combating terrorism. Korea is now a party to the twelve International Antiterrorism Conventions and Protocols and has signed the “International Convention for the Suppression of Acts of Nuclear Terrorism.” It is also actively involved in implementing the travel restrictions and financial sanctions on the individuals and entities linked to Al-Qaeda and the Taliban imposed by the UN Al-Qaeda and Taliban Sanctions Committee. From 2007–09, Korea chaired the APEC Counterterrorism Task Force and played a leading role in launching various counterterrorism projects to ensure that regional trade and investment not be disrupted by terrorism. The Korean government also signed the ROK-ASEAN “Joint Declaration for Cooperation to Combat International Terrorism” in July 2005 to assist ASEAN member countries in strengthening their counter-terrorism capacity through education, training, and consultations. Lastly, the Korean government has been very active in the annual Intersessional Meeting, seminars, and workshops sponsored by ARF to address counterterrorism and transnational criminal issues. In the early half of 2009, the ROK co-chaired the seventh ARF Intersessional Meeting on Counterterrorism and Transnational Crime. Thus, the Korean government has been increasingly proactive in trying to contain the threat of terrorism both at the domestic and international level.

Piracy

Along with terrorism, piracy is viewed as an important transnational threat by the Korean public and the government. Piracy has garnered public attention because of increasing incidents of Somali pirates seizing Korean merchant vessels—as well as foreign vessels with Korean sailors onboard—and holding their crews for ransom in the Gulf of Aden. Approximately five hundred Korean vessels transit through the Gulf of Aden each year, and about one hundred and fifty of them are vulnerable to pirate attacks because of their low speed.

Since 2006, six vessels that were either Korean-flagged or carrying Korean crew members have been hijacked off the waters of Somalia. The

latest incident involved the September 10, 2008 hijacking of a merchant vessel, Bright Ruby, with eight Koreans onboard. Prompted by increasing public pressure to protect Korean vessels after the French government in April 2008 rescued a hijacked French vessel by military means and the passage of a series of UN Security Council Resolutions sanctioning foreign military intervention to suppress piracy in Somali territorial waters in 2008, the Korean government approved the deployment of the naval unit, Cheonghae-jin, to Somali waters in March of 2009. The unit consisted of a destroyer, Munmu the Great (on a rotating six-month tour), with three hundred crew-members, a Lynx anti-submarine helicopter, and three rigid inflatable boats. The name of the unit refers to a maritime base in the Yellow Sea (on what is now Wando Island) that was established by the renowned Korean general Jang Bogo (787–846 AD) of the Unified Silla Kingdom to protect his vast commercial empire from pirate attacks.

The Korean destroyer’s primary mission is to ensure the safety of Korean and other foreign commercial ships by escorting them through pirate-infested waters. Its mandate also includes conducting operations to monitor, inspect, stop and seize pirate vessels by using force, if necessary, and to prevent arms smuggling, drug trafficking, and terrorism in cooperation with US-led multinational Combined Task Force 151 of the Combined Forces Maritime Component Command based in Bahrain. The South Korean navy also is to coordinate closely with the US and Japanese navies, on which they will rely for material support in conducting operations in Somali waters. Since its deployment, Munmu the Great has escorted a total of three hundred ships and has rescued seven commercial vessels (including a North Korean ship) from pirate attacks.

The deployment of a Korean naval unit is significant beyond the suppression of piracy. Sending its military for the first time to protect the lives and the property of its citizens abroad is the clearest affirmation by the Korean government of the importance of protecting vital sea lanes critical to Korea’s foreign trade and energy supply and of developing its naval power to protect its national interests. Second, instead of operating independently or waiting for the creation of a UN-led force, the decision by Korea to join the US-led Combined Task Force 151 to carry out antipiracy operations is a sign of its commitment to cooperate with the United States in mitigating transnational threats and, more broadly, to strengthen the ROK-US strategic alliance on the basis of common interests and values. Third, the ROK’s participation in multilateral military operations to suppress piracy is a manifestation of Korea’s desire to

assume greater responsibility for maintaining international peace and safety in its pursuit of becoming a “Global Korea.”

International Crime: Drug Trafficking

Because narcotics production and drug abuse are not significant problems in South Korea, the ROK regards the transshipment of drugs and the export of precursor chemicals used in manufacturing illegal drugs as its most serious drug trafficking concerns. As a result, the Korean government has taken proactive steps to prevent transshipment of drugs through its borders and domestic companies from exporting precursor chemicals. Transshipment of drugs is a growing concern because South Korean ports are increasingly being used as a transit point for the shipment of large quantities of narcotics by international drug traffickers. Korea has become an attractive transshipment location because, paradoxically, Korea does not have a serious drug problem and the Korean port of Pusan is one of the largest in East Asia. By transiting the drugs through Korea, the illegal shipments are not as likely to draw the attention of contraband inspectors upon arrival as are shipments from countries with a stronger link to illegal drug usage or production.

The countries of origin for transshipped drugs include Thailand, China, North Korea and Canada for heroin; the United States and Spain for ecstasy; Iran and South Africa for marijuana and hashish; and China, Thailand, the Philippines and North Korea for methamphetamine. The precursor chemicals used for manufacturing narcotics, such as ephedrine and ascetic anhydride originate mostly from China for transshipment to South America and to the Middle East region. At present, drug abuse is not a serious problem; however, Korean authorities are concerned that the popularity of Korea as a transit point for shipping drugs may lead to an increased supply of drugs in the Korean market. They fear that increased accessibility and lower prices could lead to greater illicit drug use.

To combat the transshipment of drugs and precursor chemicals, the Korean government has taken aggressive, proactive steps domestically as well as internationally. In 2004, the government amended legislation to enhance its control and enforcement procedures of certain precursor chemicals and to impose criminal sanctions against companies that transship precursor chemicals through Korea. Previously the government could bring only administrative charges of mislabeling against these companies. The Korean government also has created a program with

greater power to punish domestic companies for exporting precursor chemicals. But the lead agency responsible for the program—the Korean Food and Drug Administration—does not have sufficient resources and manpower to monitor the program effectively. To curb the flow of drugs through airports, the government has increased the presence of security personnel and instituted tighter screening processes for persons, luggage, express mail and cargo.

In addition, Korea has strengthened international cooperation to mitigate drug trafficking. Korea is a party to the 1988 UN Drug Convention, the 1971 UN Convention on Psychotropic Substances, and has signed the UN Convention on Transnational Organized Crime. Korean authorities also exchange information with international counter-narcotics organizations such as the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and the International Criminal Police Organization (INTERPOL). Korea, moreover, has signed extradition treaties with twenty-three countries and mutual legal assistance treaties with seventeen countries including the United States. These treaties are essential in facilitating cross-border drug trafficking investigations and prosecution. Furthermore, ROK narcotic law enforcement authorities work closely with the US Embassy’s Drug Enforcement Administration Seoul Country Office and the US Immigration and Customs Enforcement officials in co-sponsoring training programs, sharing intelligence on the importation of precursor chemicals into Korea, and monitoring airport and drug transshipment methods and trends. In 2007 the Korean government also established a Liaison Office for International Cooperation in the Golden Triangle region to provide Laotian law enforcement officials with training in drug investigation techniques and equipment, as well as assisting with their anti-drug abuse public campaign. This capacity-building program was extended to Cambodia and Vietnam in 2008, and the government is now in discussions with ASEAN to expand this program to other member countries including Indonesia.

Climate Change and Environmental Degradation

Although climate change and environmental degradation do not merit the same degree of security concern as terrorism or piracy, the current Lee Myung-bak administration has recognized climate change and environmental disasters as potential new threats to the security and welfare of the Korean people. According to one recent study, global warming on

the Korean Peninsula is accelerating at twice the pace of the world average and, in the case of Seoul, at three times faster than the global average over the past century. The effects of climate change are now being felt by increasing occurrences of typhoons and torrential rainfall.

Against this backdrop, President Lee has taken a visible and proactive stance in addressing the problem of climate change through major, new initiatives in the domestic and international arena. The government has announced that it will support the global vision of reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 50 percent by 2050 and plans to announce by the end of 2009 a voluntary mid-term goal of mitigating emissions for the year 2020. It is currently considering a 4 percent cut in greenhouse emissions by 2020 from 2005 levels, even though Korea is not required to declare a target for reducing emissions because it is not currently included in Annex 1 of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change under the Kyoto Protocol. Although the business community is expected to oppose the government initiative, the 4 percent target is quite modest when compared with other advanced industrialized countries like Japan and even some developing countries such as Indonesia, which has announced it will reduce greenhouse gases by 26 percent by 2020. The Korean government also has proposed establishing a registry within the secretariat of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change to encourage and support the voluntary reduction of greenhouse gas emissions by developing countries. In addition, the government, through its “East Asia Climate Partnership,” is investing USD \$200 million over the next five years to fund programs that will assist East Asian countries in promoting economic growth compatible with climate change.

To further deal with the global challenge of climate change, the Lee administration has announced an ambitious plan to develop a new paradigm for economic development based on “Low Carbon, Green Growth.” Over the next five years, the government working in conjunction with the private sector, plans to invest nearly USD \$100 billion in developing green technologies, improving energy efficiency in the industrial sector, and promoting green lifestyle changes to reduce energy consumption and resource use. Thus, the Korean government has decided to take a leadership role not only in increasing global awareness of the dangers of climate change, but also in fostering international cooperation to address this problem and in reducing gas emissions through the Low Carbon, Green Growth economic model.

The Lee administration also has announced that it will strengthen

cooperation with China, Mongolia, and North Korea to resolve one of the most serious environmental problems in Northeast Asia—the dust and sandstorms (DSS) that are highly detrimental to people’s health and the economies of countries in Northeast Asia. The sandstorms, which have increased in their intensity and frequency in the last fifty years, blow from the deserts of Mongolia and China and, as they pass over the Korean Peninsula and Japan each spring, deposit dust and fine sand particles below. As the dust particles pass through the industrial complexes in eastern China, they pick up pollutants that cause respiratory, skin, and eye ailments, lung and immune diseases, and damage to the farming and industrial sectors amounting to billions of dollars.

Korea has tried to tackle the DSS problem multilaterally, as well as bilaterally, by establishing monitoring stations and promoting reforestation efforts. But regional cooperation in mitigating DSS has been difficult due to the security implications of sharing weather observation data. In 2006 Korea, China, Japan, and Mongolia agreed to create a regional DSS monitoring network, which would provide real-time data on dust levels and wind movements to be shared by the four countries. But, according to a Japanese press report, just before the start of the test run in February 2008, the Chinese government notified the Japanese government that it would not be able to provide the meteorological data, citing the passage of a law prohibiting the release of the data as a state secret affecting national security and interests. Insofar as most of the DSS originate in China, the country’s lack of participation in the project casts serious doubt on the feasibility of a regional monitoring network. In contrast to China’s reluctance to share its weather data with Japan, Korea—which signed a bilateral agreement with China in 2005 to establish monitoring stations in central China to better observe and predict the movement of DSS—continues to receive data from ten Korea-China Collaborative DSS Observation centers in China. But the transmission of data to South Korea from similar DSS observation facilities in North Korea, which the ROK government established in 2007, has been suspended.

In addition to the efforts of the Korean government to work with other Northeast Asian countries in developing a regional monitoring and forecasting network, it has tried to curtail the frequency and the intensity of DSS by funding reforestation projects in the region. From 2000 to 2006, Korea’s Ministry of Environment spent USD \$5 million on reforestation in China and Mongolia by planting twenty million trees to prevent further desertification. Korea also plans to continue helping Mongolia with its

forestation efforts by planting five hundred hectares of trees every year from 2007 to 2016 in Mongolia. Lastly, the four Northeast Asian countries are working with the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) in monitoring and reducing dust levels through information sharing.

Conclusion

With the Lee Myung-bak administration, a major shift has occurred in the way Korea views and responds to the increasing array of new and diverse threats to its security in the twenty-first century. The Korean government is acutely aware that, while the traditional military threat remains high in the Korean Peninsula due to the ongoing controversy over the North Korean nuclear issue, ROK faces new transnational or nontraditional threats that often are not subject to the control of national governments. As a result, the Korean government is cognizant of the importance of bilateral and multilateral cooperation in mitigating the danger that the threats pose to the security and welfare of the Korean people.

By elevating the ROK-US alliance to a strategic partnership, the Lee Myung-bak administration has broadened the scope of bilateral cooperation with the United States to counter transnational threats at the regional and global levels. Another noteworthy development that signals a marked departure from previous administrations is the heightened determination of the current government to work with the international community in mitigating transnational threats, not by passively following the lead of others, but by taking the lead in addressing those threats by shaping the agenda, setting an example, and contributing expertise and resources. This proactive response on the part of the Korean government is a reflection of a growing sense of its own global responsibility for maintaining international peace and security, of which Korea has been a beneficiary in its rise to a prominent position in the international community. By playing a global role in addressing these threats commensurate with its national power, Korea believes that what it is doing is good for the international community and, ultimately, good for meeting Korea's own future challenges.

¹“*Global Views 2004: Comparing South Korean and American Public Opinion and Foreign Policy*,” Chicago Council on Global Affairs, 2004, http://www.thechicagocouncil.org/UserFiles/File/POS_Topline%20Reports/POS%202004/2004%20US_Korea%20Comparative%20Global_Views.pdf (accessed December 3, 2009).