

Conversation with Dr. Bruce BENNETT and Dr. KIM Taewoo
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HAHM Chaibong: It is a great pleasure to organize this session with two of the leading experts in the field of military issues. Today's topic will be the military reforms currently being undertaken by the Republic of Korea's military and, more specifically, Defense Reform Plan 307. To better understand where we are in terms of military reform, we have two experts on hand, one from the United States—Dr. Bruce Bennett (Senior Defense Analyst, RAND Corporation)—and one from Korea—Dr. Kim Taewoo (Senior Research Fellow, Korea Institute).

Dr. Bennett and Dr. Kim come at a timely moment, as South Korea is undergoing a serious debate within its society regarding the future readiness of the Korean military. They have been working closely together for many years already, and it truly is a reflection of the state of our alliance that such distinguished experts have been working together and sharing knowledge in absolute trust. In addition, we have Dr. Bong Youngshik and Dr. Woo Jung-Yeop of the Asan Institute to aid the conversation. Let us start the conversation by first talking about the current state of military preparedness in the ROK and the alliance in comparison to North Korea. Then, let's move to the 307 reform and how it makes up for the shortcomings of current military preparedness, why it may still fall short, and what future adjustments there should be.

Bruce BENNETT: Part of the difficulty in looking at the future of military forces in Korea is that there is no single fixed scenario. Traditionally, the worry has been about a North Korean invasion of the South, but there are now other scenarios—such as provocations, a North Korean collapse, and a longer-term scenario of how security can be achieved after unification. Historically, the force-building has been aimed at preventing a North Korean invasion. The combined U.S.-ROK capability is now substantial, but it may have a few gaps, especially against asymmetric threats. However, in terms of basic capability it is very strong.

The difficulties arise when dealing with provocations, and these difficulties reflect gaps in the defenses. When a warship is sunk during a time of war, that is the price of war. However, when a warship is sunk in peacetime, it is a very different situation. Thus, the provocations have to be looked at in a different way. Failure to provide defense of any magnitude is a potential problem. Part of the difficulty stems from the fact that the focus has been on invasion, and the military has made choices that have led to security gaps, with two such gaps being on display in the two incidents—anti-

submarine warfare and artillery. In Seoul, there is no basic defense against artillery except to fire back but, while that is helpful over time, it does not prevent damage from being done. There is also vulnerability in cyber defense such as the jamming of GPS signals. Also, North Korean ballistic missiles are a potential threat. Thus, there are a variety of individual threats which have not been fully resolved. These need to be focused on, and this is one part of the current concern.

The second concern is that if the instability in North Korea continues to grow, and if there is a collapse after Kim Jong-il's death, are South Korea and the United States prepared to deal with that situation? This is a function of having adequate military forces and favorable attitudes in North Korea. If the North Korean military has to be defeated, that is a very different situation from having convinced the North Korean military that unification would be a good thing for it. That is a task that has yet to be accomplished. Also, the military demands on the ROK and U.S. forces will be very high. There are also gaps associated with this kind of scenario. Ultimately, it is a matter of defensive gaps and trying to deal with altered concerns about security.

HAHM Chaibong: In terms of the traditional threat that we once thought was the main source of threat from North Korea, do you think the alliance capabilities are quite strong, except for the asymmetric threats?

Bruce BENNETT: That is correct, but the asymmetric threats could become very serious. If North Korea were to fire a nuclear weapon at South Korea, that would significantly change outcomes. U.S.-ROK forces are not perfectly resolved in terms of an invasion, but most of the standard ground force interactions are in good shape. However, if North Korea uses asymmetric threats, this could be a serious issue.

KIM Taewoo: I think the South Korean military should be prepared to deal with at least four different kinds of threats—provocation from North Korea, all-out war, North Korean contingencies, and security threats in the post-North Korean era. Today, I would like to focus on the provocations, because that is the most immediate threat. While I worked for the Presidential Commission for Defense Reform, I personally tried to eliminate certain misconceptions held by some South Koreans vis-à-vis how to perceive the North Korean threat. For example, South Korean youngsters have the tendency to believe in economic statistics and think that North Korea is no longer a match for South Korea, so there is no reason to worry.

Defense Reform Plan 307 is also reflective of the effort to eliminate these misunderstandings. I would like to focus on the credibility of the U.S.-ROK alliance

and extended deterrence. Even though there is a very robust and substantive alliance system, there are problems with focusing on details. An increasing number of Koreans are questioning if the United States will use its own nuclear weapons to protect Seoul, and whether the nuclear umbrella can be trusted. North Korea's 'nuclear shadow strategy' also has to be considered. While it is not actually using nuclear weapons, North Korea is using its nuclear capabilities as a means to blackmail the United States, in which case, extended deterrence is useless. This is a threat that South Korea should deal with on its own, and that is why the alliance should focus on the provocations. North Korea utilized the nuclear shadow strategy and believed that South Korea would not respond to provocations out of fear of North Korea's nuclear capabilities. This is the background for the *Cheonan* and Yeonpyeong incidents, and filling that gap should be a focus. This is also well reflected in the 307 reforms.

HAHM Chaibong: Dr. Bennett, is this exactly what you meant by 'asymmetric threat?'

Bruce BENNETT: I think Dr. Kim and I are talking about similar things. When discussing provocations, it is important to make an analogy. If I am going to play a game of chess, not only should I think about how to respond to what the other side has done, but I also need to be planning two or three moves ahead. I need to be telling my adversary what my response will be if they conduct another nuclear test, and how I will respond if the situation escalates after that. When those plans are presented, the presenter must be prepared to execute them. Sometimes, it is very hard to justify a military response to provocations. For example, it could not be immediately proven that North Korea was responsible for the sinking of the *Cheonan*. It took a long time, and by the time it was proven, it was very difficult to make a military response. Other kinds of responses need to be sought, and those responses need to be seen as being credible. A part of the problem is that the reason Kim Jong-il continues to make these provocations is forgotten. He did not sink the *Cheonan* because he was trying to defeat the South Korean navy—it was not a military objective. It was a heavily political objective for internal purposes—to show that the regime is still in power and the North Korean military was more capable than the South's. A political response needs to be sought. As Chinese philosopher Sun Tzu said: "Attack the enemy's strategy." Figuring out how to do this is fundamental to defense reform.

HAHM Chaibong: This has been a source of incredible frustration on the part of South Korea. It is not the first time provocations have taken place, and throughout numerous and brutal provocations, South Korea has almost never responded. Has South Korea now found a way to respond, and is that response credible?

KIM Taewoo: By raising the predictability of what will happen when another provocation occurs, North Korea can be deterred. Currently, South Korea is trying to focus on military responses. I think at least three elements are needed in order to have credibility—a show of will, military means to support such will, and a real example of a response. A big dilemma is the possibility of escalation. Whenever discussing methods to deter North Korean provocations, many people ask what would happen if this escalates into all-out war. However, escalation should not be discussed because the more this possibility is discussed, the more North Korea is motivated to continue provocations. For now, South Korea should focus on showing will and having the military means to respond. Looking at Plan 307, it can be inferred that South Korea’s Ministry of Defense is moving in this direction. Defense Minister Kim Kwan-jin told the commanding officers in the frontline areas, “Do not report in times of provocation; do what you need to do and report later.” This means that South Korea is trying to move in a more proactive direction. Another problem is how much support can be mustered from the public and allies—this is a critical element. For example, the missile defense issue is still pending between Washington and Seoul.

HAHM Chaibong: Let us move into the concrete details of Defense Reform 307. Dr. Bennett, could you give us your sense of the broader picture of where the reform is heading?

Bruce BENNETT: I think it is important to compare the 2005 Defense Reform Plan 2020 with Defense Reform 307, because the two are very different. I am speaking largely based upon details from media reports. The focus of the defense reform in 2005 was to meet the coming demographic challenges in South Korea. The base birth rate is very low, and over time there will be a great difficulty in retaining the size of the military. There was a manpower vs. technology tradeoff that was being discussed. Defense Reform 307 is focused on provocations, and how to best solve this threat. It does not ignore the longer term effort, but the focus is on the shorter-term—strengthening the shorter-term deterrence in the next three to five years. The ability to fill the gaps in terms of defensive capabilities needs to be evaluated. For example, capabilities such as defense against missiles or long range artillery are very important. If North Korea is to be deterred, it is a matter of balancing the benefits it thinks it is going to get as weighed against costs. I think Kim Jong-il was surprised by the Yeonpyeong incident, as he did not expect the ROK public reaction, which was very negative toward the North and very supportive of President Lee. This is exactly what he did not want to happen, so he has to be more careful in the future with the political side of what he is doing. South Korea needs to be prepared to balance these kinds of

issues, and by moving military capabilities out on to the northwest islands, the artillery attacks and specific kinds of provocations can be deterred.

KIM Taewoo: I would like to make a few corrections to what Dr. Bennett has just said. When I began my work within the Presidential Commission for Defense Reform, there were five objectives—to narrow the distance between the people and the military, to prepare against immediate threats, to put the military on the right track toward future military capabilities, to achieve unity of the military services, and to increase efficiency in order to save money. Reform 307 is not only focused on provocations. Yes, the media coverage focuses on issues related to provocations, but the spectrum of covered issues is much wider.

Also, I have a slight disagreement with his theory of defense. The more South Korea increases its defensive posture the less North Korea is motivated to attack, but the problem is that South Korea has a limited budget and resources. Thus, there is a problem in deciding which aspects to prioritize. Defense is important, but the capability to retaliate and punish is important too. The question is about which is more effective in deterring North Korea. Defense is a passive deterrent, but the ability to punish and retaliate can have a more immediate effect. The United States is emphasizing missile defense, but Koreans argue that that money should be spent to enhance abilities to retaliate and punish. Unless the vicious cycle of provocations is stopped, the democratic values South Korean society cherishes can be diminished. If North Korea is simply allowed to continue their provocations, it can increasingly threaten South Korean voters and can distort elections, because people may become afraid of a nuclear armed North Korea. If this psychology spreads, democratic values have to be sacrificed. This is why this vicious cycle of provocations must be stopped.

HAHM Chaibong: The reform seems to be about internal cohesion and support as much as the actual military elements. It is interesting that Dr. Bennett mentioned that most of the motivations for North Korean provocations are internal political reasons, and Dr. Kim was saying that South Koreans should prepare mentally as well. However, what is happening in terms of hardware? How do we make South Korea's will to respond more credible? Are there more concrete details on the military side of things?

KIM Taewoo: Plan 307 can be divided into three categories. First, there are issues regarding how to raise the readiness of the military, such as improving the existing structure, and reshaping the relations between the headquarters of each service and operational command. Second, there is a category of weapons and hardware, such as stealth air force fighters, persistent guided missile (PGM) capabilities, and anti-

submarine capabilities. Third, there are mental and spiritual issues. The difference between the mental readiness of the South Korean and North Korean military are being closely analyzed. A soldier in the North Korean military serves for at least 8 years so, in terms of maturity and combat readiness, we are far inferior. A soldier in South Korea's military serves for less than 2 years, and just when soldiers are becoming properly trained to fight, they leave. The spiritual element is also very important, and in each service they are strengthening the education of new recruits about how to perceive South Korea vis-à-vis North Korea, national identity, and similar things. High ranking officers are spending time intensifying this kind of education.

Bruce BENNETT: When I said earlier that the emphasis is on the short term, it does not mean there are no mid-term and long-term objectives. However, a lot of the focus up front is in the shorter-term. As for the hardware, there is no question that it is focused on acquiring the right capabilities. In terms of the mental, spiritual, and period of time spent in service, South Korea will have a difficult time after 2020 in maintaining a large enough military. As active duty forces decline substantially, reserve forces need to be strengthened. A selective part of the reserve forces will be needed that are able to do more than what reserves have been able to do before. That will be an important part, which is also consistent with the mental and spiritual focus. Soldiers are not trained to be useful for only 21 months, they are trained to have a role in the long-term, even after they have returned to society. In terms of the command structure, the dual track command system that Korea has had in the past is always going to be problematic. Moving to a single track command system is important, but the details of how to do that raise some important issues.

In responding to North Korea, it has to be remembered that military attacks and sanctions are not the only options. North Korea is committing provocations not because it is a strong state, but because it is a weak state and is trying to deal with its weakness. This is understood in the South, but people in the North are increasingly hearing broadcasts from outside. Especially, the elites in North Korea have to understand the reality of their state, that the framework for unification exists, and that will not be a disaster for the elites as Kim Jong-il depicts. Those are political actions that can be taken that directly attack Kim Jong-il's plan.

HAHM Chaibong: It is interesting to hear two of the foremost military experts talk more about the political aspect and internal cohesion in society just as much as the military and hardware aspect of things.

BONG Youngshik: My question is directed to Dr. Kim. What seems absent in the Defense Reform Plan 307 is how to place the defensive posture of South Korea in the broader picture. President Obama and President Lee Myung-bak have repeatedly stated that the future military alliance between the countries will be focused more on values and serving the broader purpose of global security. However, the current reform seems to be more focused on deterring provocations from North Korea and renovating South Korea's defensive posture. Is there any plan for the South Korean military to harmonize what is essential for its internal needs with the long-term broader picture?

KIM Taewoo: What Dr. Bong is raising is quite right, but the commission decided that it is beyond South Korea's scope. The goal should be globalized, and South Korea should work with the United States in the global arena, but that is beyond South Korea's scope of operation.

BONG Youngshik: However, would you say that there is a political commitment or resolve on the part of the South Korean government?

KIM Taewoo: We are meeting people and discussing these matters, but unfortunately, politicians are not very interested.

Bruce BENNETT: There is an important opportunity here which is being missed. After unification or regime collapse there will be a humanitarian disaster which will require immediate intervention. It would be difficult to deliver enough humanitarian aid over roads and through the DMZ. What needs to be done do is to prepare the ROK and U.S. marines to work more closely together to deliver aid across the beaches into North Korea. According to the 2008 North Korean census, conducted by the United Nations, 9 million North Koreans live in the coastal counties. This is a large percentage of the total, and if aid could be delivered through the beaches, the ports—where the black market and the military would siphon much of that aid away—could be avoided. Aid could be directly delivered to the people. The United States is about to move 8,000 marines from Okinawa to Guam. Perhaps part of this force could be moved to Korea, and also bring some amphibious shipping to Korea. Then, jointly loading and delivering that aid could be rehearsed.

KIM Taewoo: While working for the commission, we did our best to expand the role of the South Korean Marines, and the government tried to accommodate those recommendations. However, the government has its own problems, such as budget limitations and limited manpower, and that is why this was classified as a medium-

term goal. What is more immediate is how to reshape the marines to better respond to North Korean provocations. This is why immediate augmentation of the marines will happen soon. Also, the Minister of Defense is working on establishing a new command in the western island areas. This is to show South Korea's will to deter North Korea. Establishing new command does not change the level of military capability, but a message is being sent to North Korea that South Korea has more power and discretion to immediately respond to provocations. I strongly agree with Dr. Bennett that we have to reshape the cooperation patterns between the marines of the two countries. It is a very important issue.

As for the reserve forces, there are a lot of problems in this regard. First, the birthrate is very low. One couple has less than 1.2 children, so there is a huge problem regarding the population size. A certain level of army troops cannot be maintained. Thus, the level of the regular army forces has to be reduced, but South Korea should maintain a very strong and mobile reserve force. This is why we on the commission recommended reforms in the reserve forces. Again, there are budget problems, and that is why this topic is also classified as a medium-term and long-term reform task.

HAHM Chaibong: Could I press you on the issue of bringing the U.S. Marines to Pohang?

KIM Taewoo: Personally, I advocate that. I have tried to allocate an area on South Korea's western coast for the involvement of U.S. Marines in case of emergencies. However, there are complex problems regarding politics and competition among services.

BONG Youngshik: Asan just commissioned an issue brief from the former Japanese ambassador to Russia, Kazushiko Togo, on the U.S. role in alleviating the pain of the Japanese people after the earthquake and tsunami. Japanese politicians are regretting that the Naoto Kan government did not accept the offer from the U.S. Marines to more directly participate in rescue and disaster control operations. This would have been similar to the image of the United States helping the Germans during the Berlin Airlift. This would have eliminated reservations and resentment among Japanese people about the U.S. military presence in Japan. I see a similar positive element possibly coming out of U.S. Marines playing a more expanded role in collaboration with South Korea's Marines, primarily for the purpose of humanitarian missions, not military missions.

Bruce BENNETT: If the ROK and U.S. Marines work together, they build stronger combined tactics, and they can go anywhere to provide humanitarian aid. A joint force

between the United States and Korea really helps Korea to expand its role in the international community. For example, ROK Marines can be on the U.S. amphibious ships, the U.S. Marines can be on Dokdo. Looking at these kinds of capabilities in the future, the combined relationship becomes important, as it strengthens the alliance.

BONG Youngshik: So it should not only be U.S. Marines expanding its role, but it should also be the South Korean marines expanding its role on the global scene, otherwise there will be political reservations.

KIM Taewoo: That is quite right. The commission has proposed that the marines be designated as peacekeeping forces to be dispatched outside of Korea. This is being discussed internally. However, the South Koreans need to be more fully equipped; the marines need more helicopters and more amphibious ships, as it is very poorly equipped at the moment.

Bruce BENNETT: If you look at U.S. involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan, the United States has used a lot of its marine reserve forces in addition to the active duty marines. What Dr. Kim said implies an expansion of ROK marine reserve forces. Right now, the ROK Marines only have a small reserve force. An expanded reserve force of people who have been trained in that culture and are prepared in it would be highly appropriate to this kind of commitment.

WOO Jung-Yeop: One other heated debate regarding the defense reform is about reducing the number of military generals for unity and efficiency in operating a complete defense. Compared to the U.S. military structure, what is your assessment about the current state and the proposed reduction? There was a heated debate and strong opposition from the military side.

Bruce BENNETT: The structure of officers in Korea and the United States is very different. There are approximately 40 four-star generals in the United States. Even though South Korea's forces are half as large as the U.S. forces, there are only 8 or 9 four-star generals. The Korean structure is much leaner at the very top. This has also been a concern on the U.S. side, and it is difficult to tell what the ideal structure is. On the ROK side, the previous defense reform plan had a significant reduction in the number of divisions. A reduction in divisions is one potential source of reduction in the number of generals. Also, it is a matter of efficiency in trying to decide where a general is needed as compared to where a colonel would be appropriate. I understand that the Ministry of Defense has started this kind of study and is trying to figure out where different types of personnel are needed.

WOO Jung-Yeop: Dr. Kim, do you think it is feasible for the current government at this stage to implement this plan? They have less than two years to implement it.

KIM Taewoo: I am sorry that this work could not have started from the inauguration of the Lee government. However, defense reforms should be pursued irrespective of the change in government. We expect substantial outcomes within the term of this government, but the remaining parts should be pursued in the next government. There should be some political agreement regarding this issue.

Regarding the reduction of the generals, this was not proposed as a means to increase efficiency, but as a way to narrow the distance between the military and the public. By showing this kind of effort, people can trust in the military.

HAHM Chaibong: Dr. Kim, where do you think the reform falls short, in terms of where the commission was heading in the initial stage? Please answer based on your personal view of where things should be going.

KIM Taewoo: Generally, problems come from the limit in budget, which is why I do not want to blame anybody. I am generally satisfied, because there is a general agreement between the Blue House, the Minister of Defense, and civilian experts like me. However, some specific topics have been controversial and there have been changes made. For example, there was the matter of how to merge the headquarters of each service and operational command. I think controversial decisions like that need to be postponed to allow more time to get a general agreement among different services of the military. Likewise, there are problems and limits when looking into specific topics, but the general outlook is good.

HAHM Chaibong: The last big theme that I would like to introduce is the OPCON transfer in 2015. How does that fit into this, and how does this reform fit into the broader picture? Should the OPCON transfer take place according to schedule, or is there a need for it to be postponed yet again?

Bruce BENNETT: First, let me go back to Dr. Kim's comment. The Ministry of Defense changed its accounting system in 2007, so it is hard to follow the budget before then. However, in 2011, the budget for defense capability improvement fell 3.3 trillion won short of what was planned in 2007. The budget is only 75% of what was projected in 2007. In comparison, the budget for other operations and maintenance ran at around 95% of what was projected in 2007. This shortage is not just the case in

2011. Because the budget goes up in percentages, it will carry over into the future. That is a huge amount that is limiting what the Ministry of Defense can do. This leads to difficulty in meeting the goals of the defense reform plan in terms of technology versus manpower tradeoffs. As manpower decreases, the cost of maintaining manpower will go up, leading to a smaller budget for equipment. A major part of what the Ministry of Defense need to be looking at now is how much is needed in terms of defense capability improvement and what the key problems are when the government decides to reduce the budget. Many of the things needed for a serious OPCON transfer are not cheap. In addition to the priorities that Korea has right now in dealing with the provocations, of providing better defense for Seoul and the country, there are a lot of things that will be difficult to accomplish. It does not mean that OPCON transition cannot be achieved, but it will be important in the next year to have more discussions about the route ahead. What is gained and lost by separating the commands? What is the most efficient way of command, and what are the strong rationales for changing the current status? It has been accepted by both governments, but I think the people in both countries deserve a better explanation for the objectives of the process, what will be accomplished, and the advantages and disadvantages of each option.

KIM Taewoo: Frankly, there has not been enough time to carefully consider the OPCON transfer, but there are many task force teams already working on it in both countries. We have already passed the point of no return, so we need to be prepared. Personally, I am worried about how South Korea can prepare for the highly technical C4I system. Political agreement is important, but the technical issues need to be resolved as well. We need U.S. assistance, so the United States should also be ready to offer as much assistance as possible. When we talk about each military service, the cooperation system in the marines and air force is relatively good, but the army and the navy need more ways to cooperate in case of contingencies after the separation of OPCON. A lot of tasks remain.

Bruce BENNETT: There are issues in both figuring out how to do those things and paying for those capabilities. Also, just thinking about the basic functions of command, ROK and U.S. forces work together in Yongsan every day. After the OPCON transfer, how is that kind of cooperation maintained in a way that assures that we still have a close alliance? Some of those details are being worked upon, but it is important for people of both countries to understand how that will work efficiently to keep the relationship close.

HAHM Chaibong: The argument always seems to revert back to the political side of things—especially regarding the last topic—and also when we are talking about

budget. Also, in terms of a democratic society, it is about how much the public understands what South Korea's needs are, and whether it is willing to pay for it. Ultimately, one of the most important parts in this reform is how to convince the public.

Bruce BENNETT: The U.S. military's R&D and acquisition budget is running at 20 times what South Korea is paying. Twenty times is a big difference for a military that is only twice as large in terms of personnel. That is a big gap, and it makes it difficult for Korea to afford all of the modernized weapons systems that we have been talking about.

KIM Taewoo: Within South Korean society, I think there is a big gap between the level of defense budget needed and the level of budget that the South Korean people think is appropriate. I think at least 3.5% of GDP should be spent on defense, but currently it is at the 2.7~2.8% level. As Dr. Hahm mentioned, it is a question of how to convince the people.

Bruce BENNETT: It is a matter of explaining to the people the basics of defense and what is required, and this is a challenge in both of our countries. Helping the people understand is something which the Ministry of Defense and the Pentagon need to be spending more effort on.

KIM Taewoo: More importantly, the issue of convincing the people is directly related to the transparency of weapons acquisition. This is why President Lee Myung-bak emphasizes transparency in weapons acquisition. When people trust in the transparency, it is easier to convince them.

HAHM Chaibong: We are living in a very different world post-*Cheonan* and post-Yeonpyeong, and we are waking up from a dream that the region had somehow become a safer place. We have had a rude awakening, but we still need to convince the public what the needs are for a secure defense and to ensure prosperity and peace. It is a very costly and time-consuming process, and we need to reach out to the public and try to explain the way things are right now. I hope that this meeting brings that kind of opportunity. Thank you very much for sharing your insights and knowledge on this issue.