USA-South Korean Military Cooperation and the Sino-US Standoff

As the year 2021 comes to a close, the global Sino-American conflict continues, which could radically change our attitude as to how we see the world today. Media reports on the current events do not often mention one of its important world players, the Republic of Korea (or South Korea). After all, most people associate this country with economic achievements, production of high-quality home appliances, highly original cinema, and young people heart-touching K-pop music all-over the globe. Hardly anybody closely follows what this state is like, militarily and strategically.

In 1950, the Korean War broke out between pro-American and pro-communist forces, resulting in the division of Korea into two states: The Republic of Korea (ROK) occupies the South, and the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) occupies the northern part of the Korean Peninsula. The Korean Armistice Agreement was signed in 1953, but there was no conclusion on a peace treaty, and the DPRK is officially still at war with the ROK and the US. In the event of an attack from North Korea, a sizeable US military contingent remains to protect South Korea. Moreover, the South Korean leadership granted the US the right to control its troops. It was not until 1994 that the ROK government was given the right to command its own armed forces in peacetime. In the event of war, the Americans will continue to command the South Korean military. This arrangement may indeed help the ROK feel relatively safe, but it must be acknowledged that the country is, in fact, under American occupation. It is hard to imagine that with thousands of American soldiers on its territory, the South Korean leadership would not have to coordinate more or less significant political moves it makes with Washington.

US control of the ROK Armed Forces is dramatically apparent in many areas. In the 1970s, for example, the United States provided South Korea with the technology and materials to produce missiles. However, Washington has limited their range. The ROK was not allowed to produce missiles with a greater range than stipulated. Since then,
the US has increased the authorized range of South Korean missiles several times, but restrictions are still in place.

Washington and Seoul have intensified joint military cooperation significantly in recent decades. Nuclear missile tests carried by North Korea since 2006 have contributed to this. In 2016, after another nuclear detonation conducted by North Korea, South Korea, and the United States announced the deployment of the US THAAD missile defense system in the ROK to supplement the existing Patriot surface-to-air missile systems. This deployment caused a fierce protest from China. According to Beijing, North Korea does not possess nuclear missile power that requires THAAD. It is quite possible that the Americans deployed THAAD in the ROK to deter China’s nuclear capability.

The US and ROK hold annual Security Consultative Meetings, SCM involving the US and South Korean defense ministers to coordinate their military cooperation.

In early December 2021, the 53rd US-Republic of Korea Security Consultative Meeting (SCM) where the current South Korean Minister of National Defense Suh Wook and his American counterpart Lloyd Austin met. The ministers discussed joint actions to deter the DPRK’s nuclear-missile threat and adopted new Guidelines on Strategic Planning on developing a military action plan against the DPRK in the event of invasion or nuclear strike.

At the press conference that followed the meeting, it was announced that the number of US military personnel in the ROK would remain the same at 28,500. The reason behind US troop presence in South Korea is given as the likelihood of North Korean aggression.

Lloyd Austin said North Korea's missile and weapons developments are increasingly destabilizing for regional security and that the US seeks peaceful dialogue with the DPRK.

Suh Wook said the ROK and the US had made progress in talks to hand over wartime command of their troops to the South Korean side. A test of whether the ROK is ready for this is planned to be completed in 2022.

One of the most exciting statements made at the SCM-2021 press conference is that South Korea and the US are concerned about peace and security in the Taiwan Strait. This concern is interesting because the Taiwan Strait is not within the jurisdiction of South Korea.

The Taiwan Strait separates the PRC and Taiwan, a partially recognized island nation that the PRC considers its territory and demands the same of all its partners. In seeking to annex Taiwan, the PRC has used diplomatic and economic methods. The use of force is still unacceptable because of the US, which has guaranteed Taiwan protection in the event of aggression by the PRC. And now South Korea wants to get involved in securing the Taiwan Strait.

The ROK’s interest in the Taiwan issue is open to interpretation. Seoul is, no doubt, acting under pressure from Washington, bearing in mind the 28,500 American soldiers deployed on its territory. In recent years, the Sino-American confrontation has become highly acute, there is an overall competition, and the Taiwan issue is one of these directions. The US seeks to involve all of its allies in the fight against the PRC, and South Korea is no exception.

However, Seoul might not object to cooperating with the US against mainland China. South Korea does not need the PRC to strengthen and expand either.

In the decades since the Korean War, the ROK has become one of the most economically developed countries in Asia. At the same time, while reporting on South Korea’s economic successes, the media does not always pay sufficient attention to its military capabilities. Compared to militarized countries such as China and North Korea, South Korea seems almost like a “Gingerbread Kingdom,” wealthy, well-to-do, but not very combat-ready and totally dependent on its occupier ally, the US, for its defense. However, the ROK has accumulated enormous military power under US scrutiny. Its Armed Forces have 600,000 personnel in service and more than 3 million in reserve. In 2019, the ROK Armed Forces ranked fifth in the world regarding the number of aircraft. As of 2021, South Korea has the world’s tenth-largest military budget, and its Armed Forces are considered the sixth most powerful on the planet. It is quite possible that having accumulated such power, the “peace-loving and pampered” ROK has acquired grand regional ambitions and intends to become a serious player in the Asia-Pacific Region in the future on a par with China and the US.

On the other hand, the US seems to face the eternal dilemma of all power-holders in its relations with South Korea. Do they have a weak ally, which is easy to control, or a strong one, who can be of particular use but is less obedient?

Washington seems to be confident that its forces are sufficient to control the ROK. Therefore, the US is allowing it to
continue to strengthen. Therefore, in May 2021, the United States once again loosened the aforementioned restrictions, allowing South Korea to produce missiles with a range of more than 800 kilometers. In a conflict with North Korea, which the US and South Korea usually justify their military preparations to, such missiles could come in handy if launched from the southernmost parts of the ROK to the northernmost parts of the DPRK. And if they are launched from not the southernmost regions of the ROK, these missiles could also reach China.

So, in 2021, the US increased the authorized range of South Korean missiles. In December, as mentioned above, the US and South Korean defense ministers jointly expressed concerns about the situation in the Taiwan Strait. South Korea is thus showing that it is obediently following the US anti-China course. On the other hand, the Republic of Korea has an economic and military power that even the US cannot ignore. Negotiations are underway for the transfer of control of South Korean troops to the South Korean government. Apparently, the US is not sure it has enough strength to continue confronting the PRC and is strengthening the ROK to get as much help as possible. Washington is even willing to risk its absolute control over South Korea in the near future for the sake of this assistance.

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