The Terrorist Threat in South Korea in 2021

20th December 2021. The National Intelligence Service of the Republic of Korea has warned of the possibility of terrorist attacks by extremist groups in all parts of the world, including the Republic of Korea, before the approaching Christmas and New Year holiday season. The warning forms part of a report sent to 26 state institutions and 62 large South Korean companies with foreign operations. The state center for data collection at the National Intelligence Service has not ruled out the possibility that Islamic terrorist groups could attack “vulnerable targets”, such as places well-trafficked public places and modes of transport. The Republic of Korea is not secure against possible attacks, says the report.

However, the report’s conclusions concern not only Islamists, but also extremists in general. It appears that “terrorism is becoming an ever-more concrete threat” and “protests against vaccination in Europe and other countries may escalate to violence or become a target for terrorist attacks, and South Korea is no longer safe from such threats”.

Such a ferment prompts two questions which the author will address here: what is the actually extent of Islamic terrorism in the Republic of Korea, and if the threat from that quarter isn’t urgent, then what does this report signify?
Intelligence reports that from the enactment of the anti-terrorism law of 2016, 489 pieces of media have been blocked for inciting terrorism or spreading terrorist propaganda, and in recent times their number has been increasing. In the 2010s several suspects were apprehended transferring money to foreign terrorist groups or inciting acts of terrorism. According to other data, over a hundred foreign citizens have been deported for violations of the anti-terrorism law. The majority of them gathered funds for terrorists or were shown to have been members of terrorist groups prior to their arrival in Korea.

The most widely-reported story was in January 2015, when an 18-year-old South Korean named Kim travelled to Syria via Turkey and ultimately joined the Islamists. This was a shock for South Korean society, as the country is far-removed from the problems of this region and the ideas of Islamic radicalism are not widespread. Kim was killed several months later in an American airstrike.

In September 2016, the Foreign Ministry of the Republic of Korea stated that it would not issue travel papers to citizens of the republic strongly suspected of travelling to Syria to join the militants of Daesh (banned in Russia). In parliament it was further reported that another two Korean citizens - a man and a woman - had also come under suspicion of attempting to travel abroad with the aim of joining the Islamists. According to counterintelligence, the pair expressed an active interest in means to join the Daesh militants and sought intermediaries using the internet.

In 2018, 6 foreign workers were deported based on accusations of support for international terrorist groups, 17,500 individual weapons were confiscated, and 65 websites hosting instructions for the manufacture of weaponry and explosives were shut down.

In February of 2019, a group of Uzbeks connected with Al-Qaida (banned in Russia) who had previously fought in Syria attempted to enter South Korea from Turkey due to the relatively large number of Uzbek migrant workers living there (somewhere between 20,000 and 30,000) After this, the South Korean Ministry of Justice resolved to limit the issuing of visas to Uzbeks resident in countries where South Korean citizens are not permitted to settle.

In July 2019 the military prosecutor arrested a 23-year-old conscript named Park on charges of violating the anti-terrorism law and the theft of ammunition. At the end of 2018 the American FBI allegedly provided the national police agency of the Republic of Korea with information that a South Korean servicemen had contacted Daesh militants. The investigation revealed that this soldier, during his national service since October 2017, which is compulsory for male South Korean citizens, he had been a member of the engineer corps and was convicted of stealing detonators for military munitions. It also emerged, that from at least as early as 2016 Park had collected and shared terrorist propaganda videos and other media over the internet. His smartphone was found to contain a video with instructions for the home manufacture of explosives, and a special app used for communication by Daesh militants. It has been established that he received email messages from militants and took an active in interest in means of joining the terrorist ranks.

On the 1st of November 2020, a Russian and a Kyrgyz citizen posted “threatening flyers” on the wall of the French embassy in Seoul. The flyers included a crossed-out portrait of Emmanuel Macron and such messages as “don’t ignore the Muslim”, “don’t destroy our religion”, and “whoever will come to us with a sword, by that sword will perish”. The police detained them several days later, and on the 12th of May 2021 they received a conditional sentence. It emerged in court that they had committed no other crimes whilst resident in South Korea, and the investigative organs discovered no evidence of any accomplices or directives from superiors.

On the 21st of February 2021, a 10-second video clip with the Korean title “I will commit a terrorist act at Incheon airport at 11 am on the 1st of March” appeared on Youtube. Later, the title of the clip was changed to “Why I agree with 9/11”, with photographs and phrases exhorting people not to criticize Osama bin Laden. “The uploading of this content is tantamount to disrupting the operations of an airport and is punishable as a violation of the law on aviation safety”, said a representative of the police, whose investigation in co-operation with Google determined that the clip was uploaded from the USA and identified the creator from their registration records and other information. The person in question was a 12-year-old boy born in Korea and generally residing in the USA. Their Youtube channel was shut down, and the matter ended there.

In October 2021 the newspaper “Dong-A Ilbo” reported that the Republic of Korea’s secret service were seeking a foreign citizen resident in the country who had shared threats on social media regarding the Afghan citizens evacuated to South Korea. After the Taliban seized control of Afghanistan, about 390 Afghans “having done special services for Korea” (that is, those who worked in the South Korean embassy and other establishments operated by the Republic of Korea in Afghanistan, along with their families) were relocated to the Republic of Korea, The government granted them special residence permits. According to the newspaper, “the foreign citizen who spread
the threatening messages had arrived in the country from South-East Asia, and claimed that the evacuated Afghans had helped the USA murder Muslims, adding that they should be barred from Muslim society in Korea.”

On the 1st of December 2021, a Russian citizen resident in the Republic of Korea was sentenced to a year and a half in prison for rendering financial aid to the Al-Nusra Front, a terrorist group (banned in Russia). It is claimed that he contacted a representative of the group on social media and transferred 2.94 million won ($2500) to aid their activities.

As you can see, news of such a scheme emerges once or twice a year and is regarded as something of a curiosity. As such it seems particular strange that the South Korean intelligence service should state that the country may come under terrorist attack. In order for such a threat to take concrete form, a country needs to have a sufficiently developed terrorist infrastructure than can not only furnish the terrorist himself, but also all the resources and means he requires to carry out his attack. However, emigrants from Muslim countries are kept under fairly strict surveillance. Moreover, acquiring weapons or components for explosive devices is much more difficult in the Republic of Korea than in Europe, and it numbers among the countries where organized crime resolves its internal disputes with knives and baseball-bats. The murder of a member of the Russian media on Korean territory in the 1990s left the whole country aghast.

Naturally, one may contend that such statement conceals a series of mistakes made in the wake of a vogue for multiculturalism and following requests from the US to receive migrants from Muslim countries on Korean territory. South Korea has received a group of refugees from Afghanistan, but this is a small group of people, and as former employees of South Korea agencies, their loyalty to the country is generally high. Moreover, they were immediately settled in isolated residences under special permits. As such their contact with the outside world is limited and surveilled. And the majority of non-political migrants arrive not from the Middle East, but from South East Asia, where Islamist ideology is less prevalent.

Could it refer to domestic terrorism? - South Korea does have a tradition and vocabulary in which certain users of terrorist methods are not “terrorists” but “freedom fighters”. But so far we have little information about marginal political groups whose activities might drive them to the extreme of terrorism. It would appear that leftist groups may talk a big game of anti-Americanism, but haven’t crossed the line to actual attacks since the organizer an attack on the American ambassador received a 12-year in prison and “accidentally” had his legs broken by the police prior to sentencing. And although he was initially presented as being “connected with the DPRK”, it later emerged that he had travelled to the North under the auspices of the Republic’s Ministry of Unification, and his time there was chiefly occupied in managing an NGO that taught children why they should hate the Japanese and why Korea had the right of various historical and territorial disputes.

Actual North Korean agents have neither the means nor the motive to carry out such an act in the South. Firstly, any terrorist attack linked to North Korea would jeopardize the current “dual freeze”. Secondly, notwithstanding the conservative line the President Moon has “sold out to Beijing and Pyeongyang”, the possibility of creating the infrastructure for such an attack is very slight. Meanwhile, the saboteurs would need to be housed and equipped. Thirdly, whatever the charlatans and paid foreign agents at Radio Free Asia would have you believe, Kim isn’t a madman and wouldn’t carry out terrorist attacks “just because” - but that’s a matter for another article.

Right-wing terrorism is a theoretical possibility, but while the actions of well-known far-right groups against the North (such as the idea of spreading the coronavirus there using contaminated objects) are wholly consistent with the definition of terrorism, it remains to be seen whether they are willing or able to perform such stunts for a domestic audience.

One last potential source of terrorism is to be found in the mounting public disenchantment with the government of Moon Jae-in. This source is the growing social stratification, the acute crisis in the real-estate market, and the failures of the war against the pandemic, in which the government more than once declared victory before facing a new and stronger wave. In this situation, rage and despair might drive people to terrorist acts. Within the norms of Korean political culture, however, a more likely response to such desperate circumstances is the use of suicide as a form of political protest, rather than stabbing or blowing up some third party.

In general, the plausibility of such a scenario is low, but on the other hand, in a critical situation, even a one-percent chance of such a serious threat requires a full range of emergency measures. It is in precisely this vein that the author must add one more possible reason for a terrorist attack, though its likelihood is perhaps still less than that of those discussed above. It is that if, in the course of the presidential elections, the opposition candidate began to gain the upper hand, and if the Democratic candidate was not a supporter of Moon, the presidential administration, which
has showed itself quite capable of playing the proverbial “game of thrones”, might go so far as to flip the whole board over. A terrorist act or a series of terrorist acts with casualties would constitute such an extreme state of emergency that the elections could be postponed to a later date. Especially if one of the casualty were to be one of the candidates.

This might provide breathing-space in which to deal with the coronavirus, or to minimize the country’s problems and shift the burden of responsibility to a successor. If Moon’s policies result in the owners of small and medium-sized businesses taking to the streets, and the students and trade unions were added to that, all of this would agitate and energize the conservative electorate to the point that the president might face massive demonstrations recalling the rallies calling for Cho Kuk’s resignation, or the even the Candlelight Demonstrations.

Of course, this whole scenario rests on the question: “Does Moon have the means to do such a thing?” Especially considering that he pretty well ran the South Korean secret service into the ground and that the general level of transparency in society is such that any preparations for such a step would surely be leaked to the public, the president would undoubtedly end up impeached. However, their crimes of omission as well as commission.

In the similar cases of which the author is aware, government agencies themselves didn’t generally take part in the preparation and execution of the terrorist attack. Rather, we’re speaking of a situation in which a particular terrorist group is given special treatment: that is, the secret services, at least for the moment, leave them to their own devices and let them believe that they’re beneath notice and can get away with anything. Once a small circle of like-minded people has become a cell with concrete plans or an attack already under their belts, they can either be “caught red-handed” in fine style or else cleaned up after the attack has taken place and provided a pretext for heightened security.

Of course, such a plan smacks not merely of conspiracy-theorizing, but of a thriller in the Tom Clancy line. However one must recall that 7 years ago, at the time of the Sewol ferry tragedy, Moon Jae-in milked every last drop of the blood of the dead children, diverting popular indignation to the central authorities and ensuring that the state officials from the regions traditionally supporting the opposition, who bore partial responsibility for the failed rescue operation, were kept out of the line of fire. Given this history, the author doubts that Moon and co. have any moral qualms about such a course.

However, we can accuse the president if we have evidence, but for now this is only a hypothetical. The author hopes that to the end of this year and throughout the next, the Republic of Korea and other countries will avoid any terrorist acts. It is certainly the case that even a report that they represent a threat points to a growing social and political malaise.

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