Republic of Korea and “Terrorist Threat to the World”

Blatant terrorist attacks taking place recently, including the one of November 13 in Paris, echoed around the world. The Republic of Korea is no exception. This article will discuss Korea’s reaction to the terrorism challenge of our time and how realistic the terrorist threat is in modern South Korea.

It is clear, that in the general Western discourse, Korean authorities consider terrorism one of the top threats to their national security. This is largely a fashion statement as the threat to the Republic of Korea and its citizens from international terrorism has until now been very low.

Nonetheless, the day after the series of attacks in Paris, the South Korean Government issued a statement denouncing these actions, declaring them unjustifiable. On November 15, at the morning meeting of the leaders of the G-20 in Antalya, President Park Geun-hye expressed her deep condolences to the people of France and her willingness to cooperate with the international community in eliminating terrorism. On November 17 the Government of the Republic of Korea increased the predicted threat level of a terrorist attack by one notch: from attention to vigilance. Formally, the government's decision was made in response to the actions of ISIS, declaring its intentions to strike the United States: as the Republic of Korea is one of US’ closest allies, there is likelihood of terrorist attacks here, especially since the ISIS online magazine Dabiq posted a list of 62 countries called the Union of Crusaders. The list includes Republic of Korea.

A little bit about what this level-up means. In total, there are four levels: Attention, Vigilance, Warning, and Danger. The Attention stage is entered in the event of terrorist attacks abroad: citizens are warned of the need for extreme caution, and emergency communication lines between the concerned authorities are checked. The Vigilance stage is declared in the event of the need to strengthen the protection of important objects, as well as stricter control of substances that can be used in the preparation of a terrorist act. Critical public facilities are placed under heavy guard, and points of entry are advised to conduct more rigorous checks of those arriving in the country. The Warning level assumes limited access to sites most vulnerable to terrorist attacks and the employees of special departments are switched to emergency service mode. Danger is the highest level, involving even more extreme measures.

Then, the ruling Saenuri party noted the need to create a system for the prevention of terrorism in the country, by taking a decision on the promotion of anti-terrorist law with the need to strengthen anti-terrorism measures. Here it should be noted that there are as many as five subjects under discussion for legislation. Three of them provide for the establishment of the National Intelligence Service anti-terrorist center, the other two are focused on the fight against cyber-terrorism, including the collection of information on financial transactions, the entries and exits of persons who may be involved in terrorism.

Party leader Kim Moo Song called on parliamentarians to adopt a relevant draft law within the framework of the regular session of the National Assembly, pointing out that many initiatives in this area had previously been canceled due to opposition protests. The latter is ‘against’, believing that the promotion of the anti-terrorist law is aimed at endowing the National Intelligence Service with excessive powers. According to the leader of the parliamentary fraction of the opposition Lee Jeong Gaulle, it will allow security services to carry out unrestricted surveillance of
people on the Internet and by other means. Taking into account a number of scandals associated with the activities of the intelligence services of South Korea (it is enough to recall the recent history of spy equipment procurement, these suspicions are justified.

Meanwhile, on November 18 in the province of Chungcheong, police arrested 32-year-old citizen of Indonesia illegally residing in the Republic of Korea since 2007. In addition to charges of forgery and violation of immigration laws, he is suspected of supporting Jabhat al-Nusra, terrorist group associated with the ISIS. According to a police representative, in April this year the arrested Indonesian supported terrorist activities in social media, posting the photo on his blog, in which he is depicted with a flag of Jabhat al-Nusra. In another picture he is depicted in a cap with the logo of the terrorist group. Now the police are trying to identify the circle of the Indonesian’s acquaintances, which may also include the advocates of Jabhat al-Nusra.

According to the National Assembly, about 10 people openly supporting terrorism have been identified in the Republic of Korea. In addition, the country deported 50 foreign members of terrorist organizations.

Also, according to information of intelligence officials reported to the deputies of the National Assembly within the regular briefing, 5 people related to the ISIS tried to get to South Korea. They had explosives, but the intelligence was informed in advance, and detained them. Another intelligence report sent to the parliamentary committee, indicating a terrorist threat from illegal aliens, says that in 2010, the country deported 48 foreigners on suspicion of having links with international terrorist organizations.

In addition, the NIS detained two South Koreans who wanted to go to Syria and join the Islamic State, as was previously done by 18-year-old Kim, who managed to get to Syria and join ISIS. However, the fate of these detainees is unclear.

Under the influence of the events described above and in the framework of preventive measures to combat terrorism, the government has intensified efforts to identify the foreigners having any links to international terrorist organizations. Particular attention is given to illegal immigrants who have been in the country for over 10 years. It is believed that these not only cleverly bypass the system of immigration control, but often act as brokers, helping other foreigners wishing to work illegally in the Republic of Korea. Accordingly, control of entering the country from abroad was tightened, and the Ministry of Justice is working on enhancing the exchange of information with other States in the fight against terrorism and the identification of suspects.

All of these measures on the one hand seem logical, while on the other hand, routine, taken on the background of general concern about the situation, at least to calm public opinion.

Having told about the current actions of South Korea in the field of counter-terrorism, let’s talk about how big such a threat might be inside the country itself. Yes, in recent days a number of statements have been released that Korea is not an area safe from terrorism, but, in my opinion, this is not a major problem.

First, the terrorist organizations practically did not include the Republic of Korea in the priority list of potential targets. South Korea is mentioned among others as one of the US allies, but no more.

Second, terrorism today is not an accepted element of Korean political culture. Since the military takeover in the Republic of Korea, there has not been a single terrorist attack. Exceptions are actions of insane persons, as it was with the burning of a train in Daegu or in case of an attack on the US ambassador in March 2015. Even strongly minded student radicals chose to commit suicide to protest rather than to commit political murders. Mass demonstrations, like the recent one of November 14, also show that the left is strong enough not to slide down to terror, which is a weapon of the weak.

Third, the establishment in Korea of a terrorist network or the penetration of extremist groups encounters numerous problems, which are still relevant, especially in terms of their external visibility and potential contacts database. Immigrants from Third World countries, especially from Islamic countries, residing in Korea have neither the strength nor the opportunity to engage in terrorist activities, other than to express their approval over social networks.

Unlike, say, France, in Korea there are no ghettos, where at night the police do not dare to meddle unnecessarily. There is no such a freedom of the press, where extremist statements do not become a pretext for a trial in a short time. There are no options (especially legal) to acquire explosives or firearms. The language barrier remains as high as the general cultural barrier. But there is a developed system for detecting spies that was, of course, originally focused on North Korea, but it is not very difficult to add the Islamic machinations to the North Korean ones.
In addition, we must remember that although today the Republic of Korea numbers about 200 thousand Muslims, including about 40,000 Korean converts to Islam, if we analyze the specific areas, it appears that those varieties of Islam, which are best suited as a spiritual foundation for terrorism are not widely spread in the Republic of Korea. Actually, amidst the current crackdown, their representatives have already expressed their worries about the fact that suspicions of Islamic radicalism will apply to all Muslims.

This is to say that establishing a terrorist cell in the Republic of Korea would pose a great difficulty.

Of course, globalization in the country indirectly increases the level of the terrorist threat, but it is associated with the hypothetical developments, when due to the demographic situation in the Republic of Korea, and the features of the labor market, the proportion of immigrants, including from Muslim countries grows more significantly. In the meantime, it may be noted that Seoul does not intend to open the doors to refugees - in 2014, out of the 2896 seeking refugee status, mere 94 received it, while in 2015, the ratio is 2669 to 51. And even if the doors start to slightly open, in the first place, it would be to the Southeast Asians. However, according to the Joongang Ilbo newspaper, since 2011 the authorities have spent 27 million dollars on assistance to the Syrian and Iraqi refugees.

At the same time, although the Koreans are accustomed to perceive their country as a mono-cultural and mono-ethnic, the problem of migrants does not cause social tension. In Korean society there is a certain consensus about the need for cheap labor from outside, especially since it is controlled by the state. That’s why organizations that are, relatively speaking, in the DPNI niche, do exist in Korea, but have no serious impact.

Of course, it can be assumed that under the pressure of external forces the Republic of Korea will have to conduct towards the Middle East refugees a "more European" policy, making the number of distressed migrants grow, and under an increased pressure on immigrants from the local authorities and nationalists, some of them will become more susceptible to terrorist agitators, but that would be too much of a stretch.

So far, such a threat can be viewed at the same hypothetical level as the option of appearing of terrorist activities inside Korea associated with a situation of the absorption of the North by the South and the “leftist” terrorist organizations appearing in the country. According to the author, this is possible as a result of the resistance in the “remnants of the Pyongyang regime” and, more likely, high social tensions between northerners and southerners. However, first, the absorption needs to happen, the probability of which is low in the short term.

But since we have already touched upon the DPRK it is worthwhile to say about how likely a “terrorist threat from the North” is, especially since the talk about bringing the North Korea back to the list of countries sponsoring terrorism has already begun in the US. Though, so far they revolve around the so-called cyber-attacks, and, according to the director of SecureWorks, Joe Stewart, there is no evidence that the DDoS-attacks on US and South Korean websites are organized with the support of the North Korean government. Moreover, with regard to the most publicized attack, just four days later it turned out that in fact the attacks came from the Republic of Korea after which the alleged attacker was arrested, and the management server was found. "The North Korean hackers" have become the perfect excuse for domestic sloppiness. And the evidence linking Pyongyang and Islamic terrorism is yet to be discovered.

If one considers the likelihood of terrorist attacks in the south, committed by North Korean special units, everything abuts against the question: to what extent in the current situation is it reasonable for Pyongyang to use the terrorist (or rather, sabotage) methods? In the author's opinion, this is contradicted by at least two points.

First, any terrorist acts that have North Korean origin, will not bring the desired effect, but, vice versa, rather provoke retaliation. At the same time, regardless of who will conduct the attack on the territory of the Republic of Korea, the public opinion or a certain part of it would put up the DPRK among the "main suspects", even if Pyongyang is absolutely innocent.

Second, to carry out not a single category missions, like "cross the border, blast the object, go back", but to conduct systematic “urban warfare” requires good local knowledge and the ability to disguise themselves, - this is what is missing with the North Korean commandos. It is known that the defectors from the North even pass special training courses, where they are trained to get used to the realities of the other country. In addition, for the successful functioning of the terrorist underground in a society a certain level of “support infrastructure” is required, but there is none. Understanding the problems of North Korea and the sympathy for it is not identical to the rejection of South Korean power, resulting in a desire to inflict damage to it in such a radical way.

To summarize: The Republic of Korea has repeatedly made statements, which illustrate its commitment to fight
international terrorism worldwide, and the issue of anti-terrorist cooperation appears in many bilateral agreements of Korea with other countries, but boasting such readiness is rather a demonstrative adherence to the world trend in this issue. For blowing up this topic is profitable.

First, it is an opportunity to snatch a large sum of US money spent on the fight against terrorism around the world. Second, the terrorist threat is a paper tiger, the mention of which makes it possible to divert the public opinion from the more substantive issues. Inflating terrorist threats is also profitable to local law enforcement officers for whom the fight against terrorism is a way to strengthen their positions. Third, it allows in a certain sense, monitoring trends in society, as a preventive foam whipping around the problem can help to ensure that it will not develop to a critical level.

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