

Unpacking 'Peace through Strength'

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by Ramon Pacheco Pardo

A new Commission headed by Ursula von der Leyen will soon take office, including new High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell. This will reshape the upper echelons of the European External Action Service. Meanwhile, a new European Parliament was voted in last May. The renewal of three of the EU's key institutions and bodies, coupled with a trend towards greater Europeanisation of the bloc's foreign policy, offers a unique opportunity to rethink some aspects of its external affairs. This includes Brussels' policy towards North Korea.

President Moon Jae-in has repeatedly stressed 'peace through strength' as a cornerstone of South Korea's security and foreign policy. In a major security speech to commemorate the 70st Armed Forces Day last year, Moon said that peace through strength "is the mission of [South Korea's] Armed Forces, and a genuine protagonist in an era of peace is none other than a strong military." Both before and ever since Moon has made several references to this concept.

What does 'peace through strength' mean for the Moon administration in practice? Starting with the national security component, it means the Republic of Korea Armed Forces achieving strategic autonomy and Seoul strengthening national military sovereignty. While this does not mean termination of the South Korea-United States alliance, as sometimes misinterpreted, it does involve strengthening South Korean independent military capabilities and operational autonomy.

'Peace through strength' is a key driver behind President Moon Jae-in's security and defence policy. It has two components. The national security component refers to the Republic of Korea Armed Forces achieving strategic autonomy and Seoul strengthening national military sovereignty. This does not imply termination of the South Korea-United States alliance, but it does mean Seoul taking increasing responsibility to protect itself. The foreign policy component refers to reducing reliance on the South Korea-United States alliance and boosting deterrence of North Korea and China. This is meant to reflect a change in the geostrategic landscape from a South Korean perspective. Changes include an ongoing 'fear of abandonment' by the United States, unresolved problematic relations with North Korea, and China's growing assertiveness.

This explains why the Moon administration unveiled South Korea's largest-ever military budget last August. For the first time ever, the budget stood at over KRW 50 trillion (ca. US\$ 43 billion) – the tenth largest in the world according to SIPRI. As the Ministry of National Defence's Mid-term Defence Plan for 2020-2024 also announced in August lays out, the goal of the upcoming spending splurge is primarily intended to acquire and independently develop the capabilities to further enhance the military's autonomy – as well as the fielding of these capabilities. The focus so far under the Moon administration has

been intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR), as well as missile defence and operations equipment.

It is the area of autonomous defence capabilities development that the Moon administration has been prioritising though. This is nothing new. Dating back to the 1970s, every South Korean president has sought to reduce dependence on US military capabilities. It is true, however, that liberal administrations tend to be more open to discuss this point compared to conservative governments. This has been the case with the Moon administration. Areas on which his government is focusing on include fighter jets, ballistic missiles and military surveillance satellites – as well as South Korea's own low-tier missile shield, the Korea Air and Missile Defence System.

More contentiously, Moon has made it a priority to finalise transfer of wartime Operational Control Authority (OPCON) of the ROK-U.S. Combined Forces Command by the end of his single term in office in May 2022. Currently, a US four-star general has authority during wartime. Peacetime OPCON was transferred to a South Korean general in 1994. Moon's mentor and liberal predecessor Roh Moo-hyun made wartime transfer a priority of his presidency. However, the two subsequent conservative administrations slowed down the process. This was out of deference to the South Korea-United States alliance and also due to concerns regarding the readiness of the ROK Armed Forces. Moon intends to complete the job that Roh began.

This is one of the reasons why Moon has increased capability purchases and development. Critics of OPCON transfer point out at the United States' more advanced capabilities to explain their opposition. Arguably more interestingly, the goal of OPCON transfer also explains why the Moon administration has been less enthusiastic about interruption of South Korea-United States joint military exercises than the Donald Trump administration – even as this has hurt relations with Pyongyang. Joint military exercises help the South Korean army to demonstrate its operational readiness to take over OPCON. This serves to address another criticism often raised by opponents to OPCON

transfer. Namely, the disparity in combat experience between the US and South Korean armed forces.

Focusing on the foreign policy component, 'peace through strength' builds on an ongoing reassessment of the geostrategic environment. This includes three elements. The first one is the threat from North Korea. In spite of rapprochement and lower tensions between both Koreas, no peace agreement to end the Korean War has been signed and full inter-Korean reconciliation, if it happens, will take many years. Essentially, 'peace through strength' is meant to narrow the choices for Pyongyang down to diplomacy. Stronger South Korean capabilities indicate that Seoul is ready to protect itself and strike back shall the moment to do so arrive.

Arguably more important are the two other elements though. To begin with, there is a lingering 'fear of abandonment' by the United States in South Korea. President Donald Trump has made clear his contempt for what he perceives as expensive US military alliances. This includes South Korea's. Many South Koreans believe that Trump is the symptom of a wider move in the United States to reduce Washington's overseas military footprint.

At the moment, Seoul and Washington are embroiled in defence cost-sharing talks. The Trump administration has asked for a five-fold increase in Seoul's contribution to the costs of hosting the 28,500 US troops currently stationed in South Korea. Up to 96 percent of South Koreans oppose Seoul paying more, according to a recent poll by the Korea Institute for National Unification. Both liberal and conservative politicians and media have criticised the US request. Regardless of the final outcome of the negotiations, Washington's request has contributed to the Moon administration's determination to strengthen Seoul's own capabilities.

For the fear of abandonment is not new. For example, many South Koreans were privately critical of the Barack Obama administration. From Seoul's perspective, Obama failed to stand up for the Park Geun-hye administration when China imposed unofficial sanctions on the South Korean economy in

2016, following Park's decision to accept deployment of the US Army's Terminal High-Altitude Area Defence (THAAD) system. Although THAAD targets North Korea, Beijing criticised its potential interference with its own national security interests. The unofficial sanctions on South Korea and the Obama administration's lack of support for Seoul enhanced a belief among South Koreans that it is up to them to defend their country.

The other crucial foreign policy element informing 'peace through strength' is the belief among a growing number of South Korean political and military decision-makers that South Korea's main long-term strategic concern comes from its west. In other words, China's growing assertiveness is seen as a potential threat by South Korea. This explains why the Moon government is unwilling to support any US policy implicitly or explicitly targeting Beijing – such as the Free and Open Indo-Pacific. But it also explains why Seoul sees

deterrence of China as an increasingly important priority.

THAAD-related sanctions, frequent violations of South Korea's air defence identification zone (ADIZ) by China's fighter jets and a maritime dispute over leodo in the Yellow Sea are proof, from a South Korean perspective, of Beijing's growing assertiveness. Its military build-up and disputes in the South China Sea also are. More recently, the violation of South Korean airspace by a Russian bomber during joint military drills with China's air forces further enhanced the sense in Seoul that the west, rather the north, is the region that South Korea increasingly has to focus on.

Considering the shifting geopolitical context, 'peace through strength' is seen as a means to guarantee that South Korea will be able to develop its own capabilities to reduce reliance on the United States and deter North Korea and China. In other words, a stronger military will reduce the need to ever have to fight a war to protect South Korean sovereignty.

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