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South Korea's National Security: Concepts, Threat Perceptions and Strategies

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Introduction

The concept of national security began to capture attention since the World War II. Under the Cold war structure, which is defined by the acute military confrontation between the Western and Eastern Block[1], security had been understood as military-related. Security is referred to as military security. During the period, strategic studies constituted a mainstream in security discussions. Here, strategic studies mean military security studies. Security was about the survival of sovereign states. State took center stage in security studies as a referent object and an actor to achieve security.' In the Cold War era, the concept of 'national security' was dominantly built on the two elements: state and military threat.

With the Cold War over, military threats became diluted and new threats loomed. Against this backdrop, broadening and deepening of security studies gained ground. Broadening has to do with diversification of security threats. The emergence of various non-military threats ended the preoccupation with military threats in security studies. Buzan presented five major sectors which affect security: political, military, economic, societal and environmental one.[2] An UN panel's report identified six clusters of threats: economic and social threats, including poverty, infectious disease and environmental degradation; inter-state conflict; internal conflict, including civil war, genocide and other large-scale atrocities; nuclear, radiological, chemical and biological weapons; terrorism; and transnational organized.[3] The United States *National Security Strategy* in February 2015 focuses on such threat agendas as terrorism, conflict, spread and use of Weapons of Mass Destruction, climate change, global health, energy, poverty, and equality. The evidence proves that the interpretation of security has been widened.

With the collapse of the Cold War structure, hybrid threats faced states, societies, individuals, and global community. Deepening of security is related to referent object. Focus had been predominantly given on states as referent objects. Without doubt, security was understood as national security. Discussions on security have been deepened by extending referent object from state to individual (human being), society

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[1] The Western Block includes the U.S., its NATO allies and others, whereas the Eastern Block involves the Soviet Union and its allies in the Warsaw Pact.
[2] Barry Buzan, People, States and Fear, Colchester: ECPR, 2009.
[3] Paul D. Williams eds. Security Studies, London: Routledge, 2008. p. 8.

and globe. Given diverse nature of threats, national security does not necessarily ensure individual one. In addition, global security is also challenged by newly emerging transnational threats. Deepeners contributed to grasp the operating reality of security at individual, societal, state and global level.

As examined, the end of the Cold War marked an inflection point in security studies. A comprehensive way of thinking is required, while reflecting changing nature of security threats to human being, state, region and globe. Given a tendency of broadening and deepening in security debates, each state confronts with different conditions of security which are formed by geopolitics, ethnic and religious compositions, power and global status and so on. For instance, the United States, a global leader, should cope with threats to it and to the world. Europe is threatened by immigration and terrorism. Failed states suffer internal conflicts, famine, poverty and pandemic disease due to lack of governing capabilities. In this context, it is not surprising for a country to have its own concept and perception of security and 'national security' according to its own context.

South Korea is not an exception. The Korean peninsula remains divided into the North and South since the National Liberation in 1945. In 1948, separate states were established in Korea. The fratricidal Korean War broke out by North Korea's attack in 1950 and lasted for 3 years. Since the conclusion of the Armistice Treaty, the two Koreas have struggled for physical survival, political legitimacy and initiative for reunification. There were ups and downs in inter-Korean relations over last 7 decades. Despite sporadic and short reconciliation, a security dilemma in nature defined the inter-Korean relations under the framework of military confrontation. The end of the cold war provided a turning point of strategic thinking in South Korea. The traditional approach to security was challenged by more comprehensive new thinking.

This paper is designed to examine the concept and perception of security in South Korea. The first part touches on the concept and perception of security in South Korea during the Cold War. The second one deals with the concept and perception of security in South Korea after the Cold War. The last one is devoted to a discussion on security under Park Geun-hye administration.

The Concept and Perception of Security in South Korea during the Cold War

Security concept raises essential questions: who is secured?; What poses a threat?; How to achieve security?; and What resources are available? In other words, the concept of security consists of four main elements being referent object, threat, measures and resources. Broadly speaking, security is defined as either a condition or an action. The former involves referent object and threat, whereas the latter comprises

all four elements. Security is frequently defined as a condition of freedom from threats to core values. In South Korea, there is a trend that security means an action to ensure freedom from threats with effective measures and resources rather than a condition. The tendency seems to be in part attributed to translation of security into Korean.[4]

In South Korea, there were two contending groups in regards to conceptualization of national security. Academia tends to define security as a condition. Following this group, national security means South Korea's freedom from threats by North Korea. In contrast, policy group considered the concept as a comprehensive action. National security refers to state's policy implementation to achieve a freedom from threat by North Korea with efficient instruments. Definition of the policy circle was prevalent in South Korea. In this vein, 'national security' in South Korea can be discussed in terms of four elements of security concept.

During the Cold War, only referent object was the state in South Korea. The deepening of the referent object was very rarely discussed. Security automatically meant national security in which the state should be secured. Then, what kind of threat had been focused in South Korea? The Korean War devastated newly independent South Korea. Since then, South Korea suffered from economic hardship and military threats. Priority, however, was put to military threats because physical survival is on the top of national interest list. Without national survival, economic development is not possible and has no meaning. Especially, North Korea posed grave military threats to South Korea during the Cold War, intimidating the very survival of South Korea. Of course, measures and resources were almost all military-relevant. In short, national security in South Korea was about what government ensures security from North Korea's military threats with military measures and military capabilities.

Threat to a state can be assessed with information on hostile actions by a opponent state. Intelligence agency estimates threats with facts on operating reality. To measure the precise degree of real threat, is beyond the capabilities of any state due to lack of hard data on threats. The people and policy makers, therefore, rest on threat perception rather than real threat calculation in strategic thinking. Real threats are perceived by decision makers and the public with one's own perspective of and approach to security. Perceived threats actually form a pillar of security. It was highly likely for South Korean elites and public responded to threats from North Korea based on perception. Given lasting military tension between the two states, South Koreans might perceive military threats as more serious than poverty, danger, environment devastation and others.

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[4] Language difference between English and Korean appears to affect defining security concept.

The bitter memory of a fratricidal Korean War lingered on the memory of South Koreans, while affecting the perception of North Korea in a negative manner. In addition, the Korean peninsula was an outpost of the Cold War era. Except the early 1970s' attempts for rapprochement, the two Koreas have been engaged in limited armed clashes and tension escalations in the Cold War era. North Korea carried out military provocations on the sea and land. While ratcheting up tension, North Korea committed terrors which killed many innocent civilians in bombing Korean Air Line Flight 858 in1987 and Rangoon bombing in 1983. North Korea's aggressive behavior, harsh rhetoric and hostile attitudes aggravated negative perception. Furthermore, the North's military threat to the South spawned a sense of insecurity among South Koreans.

Both Koreas had been trapped in so called spiral of security dilemma with the dynamics of action and reaction. In the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, North Korea concentrated on building up conventional military capabilities including weapons and troops. In responding to military build-up in Pyongyang, Seoul bolstered military capabilities while strengthening the alliance between the ROK and the U.S. An arms race had continued for more than 3 decades on the Korean peninsula. These negative military interactions led to escalation of military tension. South Koreans believed that priority should be put to survival from military threat from the North which continued to strengthen its military capabilities. As a result, they assessed that the South became vulnerable to the increased threat from the North.

During the Cold War era, the primary security concern and objective of South Korean government was to successfully cope with military challenges by North Korea. Amidst acute protracted military tension, South Korea could not afford to design non-military strategy and tactics with diplomacy and incentives. Realist approach prevailed over liberalist one in the era. Competition and confrontation was a norm in inter-Korean relations. Military strategy and concrete measures involves arms race, conventional deterrence and alliance. At that time, security decision makers in the South did not think that engagement and rapprochement could be effective in dealing with the North.

The Concept and Perception of Security in South Korea after the Cold War

The dissolution of the Cold War brought about new security challenges at the global level. While the military confrontation evaporated, new post-Cold War threats arose. Some strategic thinkers made efforts to expand the scope of security understanding, focusing non-military and transnational threats. Such wideners' attempts drew attention from students of security studies and policy makers. Entering the 1990s,

South Korea faced shifting security environment on the Korean peninsula and at global level. The two Koreas held a serious of bilateral talks in the early 1990s and underwent a thaw of tension. More dramatically, South Korea normalized diplomatic relations with the former hostile counties such as the Soviet Union in 1990 and China in 1992. A new security environment was created in and out of South Korea.

Reflecting the new reality and theories, a concept of comprehensive security was introduced and started to be examined in South Korea with additional concerns over non-military issues. It is this dramatic change that distracted South Koreans' security concerns and interests from military affairs to non-military ones. South Korean students of security studies were interested in such threats as poverty, famine, environmental degradation, drug, diseases, migration, human traffic, piracy and others while practitioners maintained their foci on North Korea's military threats.

Following 9/11 in 2001, terrorism emerged as a major threat at the global level and received attention in South Korea, too. The growing worry about terrorism does not completely match the conditions for terrorism in South Korea. Relatively speaking, South Korea is not very vulnerable to threats by terrorists. Cyber threats are treated as one of the grave security challenges. It is believed that sporadic mess-up of South Korean computer system is contributed to North Korean cyber-attacks. Concerns over cyber threats are growing in South Korea. They are also afraid of the negative impact of global warming, thereby trying to make contribution to the reduction of green gas emission. South Koreans are worried about the spread of pandemics as a typical transnational threat.

Before the advent of North Korean nuclear problem in the early 1990s, South Korea was definitely threatened by increasing conventional military capabilities of North Korea. As the North invested in developing nuclear and missile programs, the South was concerned about conventional and strategic weapons in the North, as well. North Korean military threat was extended to the strategic dimension. Despite the post-cold war transition in theory and practice, the fundamental structure of military confrontation remained as it was on the Korean peninsula. In this context, most of South Koreans continued to seriously feel direct military threat from North Korea, as usual, rather than by other non-military challenges. Military threats remained on top of security threat list in South Korea.

As security threats were broadened, the other three components of security concept followed the trend. The state is no longer the only referent object. The new threats are linked to the deepening of security. Human security, among others, gained ground under the situation that state security does not necessarily led to human security. Given state security maintained, individuals within a state could suffer from fear and

need. Entering the 1990s, human security has been mentioned more often than ever before in the security community of South Korea.

With transnational threats emerging, scholars also considered the society and the world as referent objects. The society of South Korea remained homogeneous to a great extent while family with multicultural background has been on the rise. There were little serious societal threats which decisively damaged societal integration and cohesion. Societal threat was not significant in South Korea. Furthermore, South Korea addressed transnational threats such as climate change, disease, drug, internal crime, terror, proliferation, cyber-attacks and so on. There was no doubt that wideners and deepeners affect South Korean security studies. In contrast, policy circle mainly addressed imminent military threats from North Korea and potential military threats from neighboring countries, placing lower priority to non-military threats. Even though South Korea followed the path to deepening, policy circle thought that the state still was a predominant referent object in South Korean security.

Getting over the Cold War inertia, South Korean political leaders embarked on a new thinking of national security. Confrontation and competition was a norm in relations with North Korea. Since 1998, the Kim Dae-jung administration took an engagement policy toward North Korea with an objective to gradually change the North via increasing interactions. The Roh Moo-Hyun administration also took the same policy of engagement with the North. Regardless of policy performance, it is significant that a new approach to security was taken in South Korean history. The new strategy is predicated on non-military means and cooperative approach. This new thinking and practice was either criticized or hailed according to one's perspective and ideological orientation. A new approach also put priority to military security from North Korean threats. It is proven by the principle of North Korea policy in Kim Dae-jung government that on the basis of robust military security, South Korea pursued reconciliation and cooperation with North Korea.

In the post-cold war era, South Korea underwent changes in concept, perception, measures and resources of security due to global transformation. It is evidenced that continuity was prevailing with limited change.

The Concept and Perception of Security in South Korea under Park Geun-hye Administration[5]

National Security Strategy of the Park administration presents the objectives of national security and principles of national security strategy. The former involves safeguarding the territory and sovereignty of the ROK and ensuring the safety of the people, establishing sustainable peace on the Korean peninsula and preparing for an era of unification, and promoting cooperation in Northeast Asia and contributing to world peace and development. Meanwhile, the latter includes establishing a solid security posture, pursuing the trust-building process on the Korean peninsula and promoting trust-based diplomacy.

The document also offers an assessment of security environment and outlook. In this part, it points to continuing uncertainty over the North Korean regime and rising nuclear and missile threats by North Korea as the essence of security environment on the Korean peninsula. Concerning regional security environment, it focuses on competition for influence and the arms race in the region and deepening Asian paradox – an ironic situation characterized by a mismatch between 'cooperative' economic relations and 'confrontational' political and security ones.

At the global level, the strategy expects inter-states and intra-state conflicts which could lead to armed clashes in the East China, South China, Middle East, South Asia and Africa. It also mentions the spread of transnational threats comprising terrorism, cyber-attacks, maritime piracy, drug trafficking, organized crime, natural and human-induced disasters, new epidemics and water shortages. Emerging security threats are also addressed in the strategy, which consist of global economic instability and volatility of global resource and energy markets.

In order to cope with existing and emerging threat on the Korean peninsula, in East Asia and in the world, the strategy specifies strategic tasks: establishing a robust defense posture and reinforce future-oriented defense capabilities; developing inter-Korean relations through the trust-building process; developing the ROK-U.S. strategic alliance and promoting international security cooperation and others; establishing cooperative frameworks for peace in Northeast Asia and around the World; and others.

According to the above outlines of *National Security Strategy*, the Park government is affected by broadening and deepening of security conceptualization. As to referent object, it takes into account the state, region and globe which should be secured for peace and prosperity. While the strategy aptly points to various threats to

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[5] This part is based on Office of National Security, The Republic of Korea, A New Era of Hope: National Security Strategy (October 2014).

security, South Korea sets safeguarding the territory and sovereignty of the ROK and establishing peace on the Korean peninsula as the main objectives of national security. This proves that military security still occupies national security of South Korea.

In terms of measures and resources, the Park government tries to take advantages from containment and engagement, as well. President Park's security strategy is in nature eclectic, mobilizing available hard, soft and smart powers all together to maximize the effectiveness of the strategy.