

Australia - Republic of Korea: New Security Arrangements

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Introduction

Richard Broinowski of the University of Sydney notes that the Joint Statement on Enhanced Global and Security Cooperation between Australia and the Republic of Korea "provides for expanded practical defence cooperation in military information-sharing, peace-keeping, civil-military cooperation, joint exercises and training, and technical exchanges in defence industries". The difficulty, Broinowski argues, "is that, like Australia's arrangements with Japan, it sends the wrong signals not to North Korea, but to China. Or rather, they are the right signals, but Korean and Australian politicians deny them. And these are that, led by the United States, the Republic of Korea, Australia and Japan are forging military arrangements to contain China. Upsetting China is in neither country's interests. China has also demonstrated good citizenship and international responsibility in continuing to host the six party talks attempting to de-nuclearise North Korea. The present Australian government, as well as its conservative predecessor, would very much like a seat at that table."

Essay: Australia - Republic of Korea: New Security Arrangements

Before leaving Seoul for a State visit to Australia on 4 March, President Lee Myung-bak reportedly told the Foreign Editor of *The Australian* Greg Sheridan that he wanted a security agreement with Australia along the lines of the agreement Canberra has with Tokyo. The Japan-Australia agreement was negotiated in March 2007 between Prime Minister John Howard and Japanese Prime Minister

Shinzo Abe. It fell short of a full-fledged security treaty because the Japanese government felt such a commitment would have violated the Japanese constitution. During Lee's Australian visit, he and Prime Minister Rudd duly released a similar agreement. Called the [*Joint Statement on Enhanced Global and Security Cooperation*](#) this, like its Japanese counterpart, is a document of less than treaty status. Unsurprisingly, it provides for expanded practical defence cooperation in military information-sharing, peace-keeping, civil-military cooperation, joint exercises and training, and technical exchanges in defence industries. The Statement augments annual political and military talks which already occur between Canberra and Seoul.

The first thing to note about this Joint Statement is its tentative nature. It is specifically non-binding, so that either side can withdraw from it gracefully if it finds its obligations are incompatible with its national interests.

The second is that many of the military ventures it envisages already take place, including ship visits and joint naval exercises, as well as exercises with the military forces of a larger group of participants such as Japan and the United States.

Third, although it talks about common interests in combating global 'terror' and participating in peace-keeping operations, it fails to acknowledge the discrepancies between the defence preoccupations of the two countries. Since its foundation in 1948, the Republic of Korea has been concerned almost exclusively with the existential threat of another invasion from North Korea of the kind that led to the Korean War in 1950. Australia has never faced such a threat. The closest it came was when Japanese forces occupied parts of Papua New Guinea in 1942, bombed Darwin, Newcastle and Broome, and launched midget submarine attacks on Sydney harbour.

The defence forces each country maintains reflect the fundamental discrepancy. The forces of the Republic of Korea are very substantial for a so-called 'middle power'. The country has a standing army of 560,000 troops backed up by reserves of 4.5 million and reinforced by 2000 main battle tanks. National service is compulsory. The Korean air force has 63,000 personnel and 538 combat aircraft, and in its navy are another 63,000 sailors manning 170 commissioned ships totalling 153,000 tonnes, including 10 submarines. Australia, on the other hand, has a full-time army of a mere 26,600 soldiers, reserves of 16,000, supported by 59 main battle tanks. There is no national service. The Australian air force has 71 fighters, 21 strike aircraft and a mixed bag of transports and trainers. The Australian navy has twelve frigates, six submarines and 14 patrol boats.

Can military exercises between such asymmetrical forces with such different defence preoccupations serve any useful purpose? Put another way, do Australia and South Korea have enough in common to justify any kind of joint military operations? The answer is a qualified yes, mainly because both countries rely for their ultimate protection on separate bilateral arrangements with the United States. And if Washington looks benignly on such bilateral exercises, the shared belief is they must be good.

But the American military presence in Korea is much more immediate and much more poised for action than it is in Australia. Since the end of the Korean War, the United States has maintained a substantial garrison on the peninsula. Once armed with nuclear weapons and staged right up against the 38th parallel at bases such as Camp Casey as a 'trip wire', the US forces have been gradually scaled back and re-positioned. They are no longer equipped with nuclear weapons, their number has been reduced to around 28,000, and they no longer occupy large areas of prime land in the centre of Seoul and other major Korean cities. But they remain an intrusive presence nonetheless, and due to an archaic provision dating back to the Korean War, Korean forces would come under American command in the event of hostilities with the North.

In Australia on the other hand, the United States maintains some military communications bases, but no fighting forces. Joint military exercises are routinely held in the Northern Territory and parts of Queensland, and there are occasional naval visits. But the American presence is generally low key and has no control over Australian forces, which is the way the majority of Australians prefer it.

The purpose of military exercises between allies or friendly nations is not necessarily to practise facing a common enemy. Indeed, joint exercises are sometimes held between countries like Japan and the Republic of Korea, which have territorial or other unresolved disputes. The fact is that military commanders are eager to test their forces in war games to ensure they are effective. A fictitious enemy is created, and the exercises are planned around some aspect of containing or defeating it. The main thing is to hold the exercises. They can comprise night time navigational exercises or simulated bombing runs by military aircraft, simulated attacks on surface shipping by submarines, landing exercises, exercises designed to alleviate regional disasters, or manoeuvres by marines and commandos against piracy and 'terror' raids. There can also be exercises without fictitious enemies, such as search and rescue operations, as occur occasionally between the navies of Japan and Korea.

The danger is that joint exercises may take place which actually exacerbate rather than deter a military threat from a third country. Thus annual Korean-US military exercises, one of which is taking place as I write, always stirs up North Korea, which puts its forces along the 38th parallel on high alert, gets on its moral high horse, and threatens condign punishment for such provocative activities. When 'Exercise Team Spirit' was conducted just before the 1988 Olympic Games, I asked the United States Ambassador at the time if it was an entirely wise move. He replied with some regret that the Pentagon marched to a different drum from the State Department, and that he had little say in the matter. South Korea provided a military exercise ground which none of the United States armed forces wanted to give up.

As I see it, the difficulty with this new Korean-Australian defence joint statement is that, like Australia's arrangements with Japan, it sends the wrong signals not to North Korea, but to China. Or rather, they are the right signals, but Korean and Australian politicians deny them. And these are that, led by the United States, the Republic of Korea, Australia and Japan are forging military arrangements to contain China. Australia's agreement with Japan in 2008 upset Beijing, and the new arrangements with the ROK are likely to do the same. Imprecise but persistent reports that China is spending an excessive amount of money on upgrading its defence forces are subscribed to by both President Lee and Prime Minister Rudd. The problem here is to quantify 'excessive'. Certainly China is building up its conventional forces, but I have yet to see an authoritative study showing conclusively that China's military assets are moving ahead of other military powers in technical capacity, particularly those of the United States. Meanwhile, in the nuclear sphere, the authoritative Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists maintains that China's nuclear weapons program continues to be characterised by cautious and very slow expansion, if expansion at all.

Upsetting China is in neither country's interests. China is South Korea's largest trade partner, ahead of the United States. And it is the second-largest market for Australian minerals and energy after Japan. China has also demonstrated good citizenship and international responsibility in continuing to host the six party talks attempting to de-nuclearise North Korea. The present Australian government, as well as its conservative predecessor, would very much like a seat at that table. I suspect that in order to boost its credentials, Australia in 2008 switched its non-resident diplomatic accreditation in Pyongyang from the Australian Ambassador in Beijing to the Australian Ambassador in Seoul. Few heads of foreign missions in Seoul have such opportunities regularly to visit and observe North Korea from such a privileged position.

Apart from the joint statement on global and security cooperation, what else did President Lee's visit

to Australia achieve? Well, it was an important opportunity to review bilateral relations since Prime Minister Rudd's visit to Seoul in August 2008. Despite current global economic shifts, South Korea remains a key market for Australian minerals, energy and travel services, and Australia for Korean cars, electronic goods and appliances. We have increasing common interests in the activities of the United Nations, the OECD, and regional arrangements such as fisheries agreements, APEC, the ASEAN Regional Forum and the East Asian Summit. The Republic of Korea is also a dialogue partner in the Pacific Islands Forum, a body of central interest to Australia.

Australia is also now home to an increasing Korean community of some 30,000 energetic citizens. They live mainly in Sydney. Australia and the Republic of Korea have moved a long way in pursuing common interests and goals since my time as Ambassador in Seoul in the late 1980s. A positive outcome from President Lee's visit has been a sharpened awareness in Canberra and Sydney of the importance of the relationship.

About the author

Richard Broinowski, currently an Adjunct Professor in Media and Communications at the University of Sydney, was a senior Australian diplomat. He was Ambassador to Vietnam, the Republic of Korea, and to Mexico, the Central American Republics and Cuba. [Fact or Fission - the Truth about Australia's Nuclear Ambitions](#) is published by Scribe Books.

Other APSNet policy forums by Richard Broinowski:

- [Australian nuclear disarmament policy - hopes, doubts, and questions](#), Austral Policy Forum 09-3A, 5 February 2009
- [Australian nuclear weapons: the story so far](#), Austral Policy Forum, 06-23A 17 July 2006
- [Australia's New Nuclear Ambitions](#), Austral Policy Forum, 06-24A 24 July 2006

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