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No. 028/2014 dated 12 February 2014

SINGAPORE AIRSHOW:

South Korea's Air Force: Does It Have a Coherent Strategy?

By Jeong Lee

Synopsis

The Republic of Korea Air Force (ROKAF) still lacks several critical features that would make it a credible independent fighting force. The ROKAF must ultimately come up with its own coherent operational doctrines and strategy, besides developing flexible and wide-ranging capabilities.

Commentary

SINCE THE late 1990s, the South Korean armed forces have attempted to transform themselves into an independent military that is capable of dealing with hybrid threats emanating from North Korea on the one hand, and with its rivalry with its powerful neighbours, namely Japan and China, on the other.

However, while the United States seems determined to hand over wartime operational control to the ROK military effective December 2015, the Park Geun-hye administration appears reluctant to exercise independent control over its military, despite repeated assurances from the Obama administration that it will work closely at strategic levels with the ROK government to deter the North Korean threats.

Reasons for Seoul's reluctance

What explains this reluctance may involve several factors. Firstly, as Michael Raska points out, the ROK military's attempts to incorporate the "revolution in military affairs" has been marked by what he calls "patterns of speculation and experimentation in terms of concepts, doctrine, and technology; however, with a relatively limited implementation of the use of force".

Secondly, notwithstanding the qualitative advantages that the ROK Air Force (ROKAF) supposedly enjoys over the North Korean Air Force, these do not necessarily translate into effectiveness or victory, because possession of hardware without clear geostrategic objectives and coherent operational doctrines tailored specifically to the needs of the service is basically meaningless. These factors may suggest that, without the presence of its American ally, it is doubtful that the ROKAF can carry out a war. So what does the ROK air strategy involve?

The ROKAF's officially stated missions are four-fold: deterrence; protection of the ROK airspace; "victory in war;" and "furtherance of national interests and contribution to world peace". Of the four, the first, second, and

fourth objectives closely mirror the strategic and operational mindset of ROKAF officers at the lieutenant colonel level and above. Also, no ROKAF officers seem to believe in achieving a clear, categorical victory in the event of war—even with the acquisition of stealth capabilities.

According to retired Lieutenant General Park Song-kuk, the ROKAF's strategic goals are “to win and support national reunification while minimising casualties and damage to South Korea's infrastructure”. But at the same time, he avers that, in the event of territorial rows with either Japan or China, “our military capability is not aimed to dominate or win a war with those nations”. Indeed, one ROKAF fighter squadron commander seemed to second this view when he told me, “while Japan and China may be our potential rivals someday, it never pays to antagonise them, since an all-out confrontation involving any of the two states will prove deadly”.

This assertion is revealing for two reasons: On the one hand, it shows that the ROK military planners view stealth fighter squadrons as “quick-reaction forces that are capable of exercising all types of air operations in the Korea Air Defence Identification Zone”. On the other hand, in addition to the potential “structural disarmament” argument as a result of the ROKAF procurement and acquisition of F-35As, and the reluctance to increase the defence budget may suggest that the ROKAF decided to purchase only 40 F-35As because “the size of high quality weapon systems [must] be small enough so that neighbouring countries may not consider them a threat”.

Redressing inherent deficiencies

Such contradictory assumptions do not provide convincing arguments for the belief that stealth fighter capabilities would “give [the ROKAF] the capability to surreptitiously strike at the heart of [their] adversaries and guarantee [their] survivability” because stealth fighters might find themselves encumbered by elaborate rules of engagement which may limit their freedom of action.

Furthermore, in the event of a localised asymmetric conflict with North Korea, fielding one over-strength stealth fighter group without additional support from its sister fighter wings, and without fully developed ISR (intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance) capabilities, will not likely satisfy its need for numerical advantages.

Simply put, pinning hopes on stealth capabilities is naïve and self-defeating in that it deprives the ROKAF of much-needed flexibility in the operational and tactical realms. So what can be done to redress the deficiencies inherent in the ROKAF operational and strategic thinking?

Firstly, the US Air Force may need to provide ROKAF with strategic guidance until the latter is capable of formulating and implementing its own. Secondly, rather than insist upon fielding stealth capabilities *only*, the ROKAF must develop flexible and wide-ranging capabilities, which include ISR and aerial refueling capabilities.

It must also complement stealth fighter capabilities with fourth-generation fighters to prevent structural disarmament. Already, the ROKAF has proven willingness to do so when it ordered BAE to upgrade its fleet of KF-16s.

Thirdly and most importantly, the ROKAF itself must ultimately come up with its own coherent operational doctrines and strategy. One way of doing this is for its Chief of Staff to select the brightest and the most promising officers, and to have them debate, test, and formulate their own operational doctrines according to the specific needs of the service. This ensures not only pragmatism, but also fosters creative thinking.

Jeong Lee is a freelance writer whose writings on US defence and foreign policy issues and inter-Korean affairs have appeared on various online publications. This commentary is adapted from his speech to the 7th Asia Pacific Security Conference (APSEC 2014) held in conjunction with the Singapore Airshow.