

S. Korea, US to Draw Up Defense Guidelines

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Global Research, December 18, 2009

[Korea Times](#) 16 December 2009

Region: [Asia](#)

Theme: [Militarization and WMD](#)

South Korea and the United States are discussing a plan to draw up “defense guidelines” next year in a bid to upgrade bilateral defense cooperation, according to defense and foreign ministry officials Wednesday.

The guidelines, similar to the U.S.-Japan Defense Guidelines established in 1996, would include key measures to strengthen military cooperation between the militaries, they said.

Among the topics are U.S. reinforcement plans in case of a war on the Korean Peninsula, the U.S. nuclear umbrella for South Korea and the stable presence of U.S. forces in Korea.

“The defense guidelines will be part of follow-up measures to materialize the Korea-U.S. alliance joint vision adopted at the summit between Presidents Lee Myung-bak and Barack Obama,” an official at the Ministry of National Defense said. “The guidelines would include a comprehensive package of measures on how the two nations are to cooperate in the event of war on the peninsula.”

In the summit meeting in Washington, D.C., Obama said the U.S. government would provide an extended nuclear umbrella to South Korea in response to increasing nuclear threats from the North.

Lee and Obama adopted a “joint vision for the ROK-US alliance” that calls for building a broader, strategic partnership in the realms of politics, economy, culture and other areas beyond the security arena.

In the Security Consultative Meeting (SCM) in Seoul, Oct. 22, U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates confirmed the increased defense cooperation with South Korea. In a joint communique issued at the end of the annual meeting, Gates reaffirmed “the U.S. commitment to provide extended deterrence for the ROK, using the full range of military capabilities, to include the U.S. nuclear umbrella, conventional strike and missile defense capabilities.”

It was the first time that detailed plans of increased U.S. deterrence capabilities for South Korea had been revealed and even stipulated in a joint statement since 2006, when the then-defense ministers from both nations first addressed the issue.

Notably, Gates said the United States would use its capabilities not only on the peninsula but also “globally available U.S. forces and capabilities that are strategically flexible to deploy to augment the combined defense in case of crisis.”

Previously, the U.S. military had only referred to reinforcement of troops from the U.N.

Command's rear bases in Japan in case of an emergency.

Observers said Gates' remarks were construed as a response to a lingering concern here that the 2012 transition of wartime operational control (OPCON) of South Korean troops from the U.S. military to Korean commanders will result in a smaller role of the U.S. military on the peninsula, and that it could tip the military balance between the two Koreas.

Under a 2007 deal on command rearrangements, the U.S. military on the peninsula is to shift to an air- and naval-centric supporting role with the South Korean military taking over main combat operations in the event of conflicts.

The ROK-U.S. Combined Forces Command (CFC) is to be deactivated and two separate theater commands of both militaries will be put in place here.

Speaking at a forum in the United States, CFC Commander Gen. Walter Sharp said the U.S. and Korean militaries have agreed to develop a single joint operational plan even after the OPCON transition. Both sides have already worked out an initial version of the operational plan and will complete the final one soon, he added.

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