

Blue-Water Navy Program as a part of South Korea's Hedging Strategy

Güney Kore'nin "Hedging" Stratejisinin
Bir Parçası Olarak
Açık Deniz Donanması Programı

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Abstract:

Competing interests of regional countries and the US-China competition in the Asia-Pacific have led a regional security dilemma and debates over power transition between these two strongest powers. This uncertainty about the future landscape of the region pushed South Korea to pursue hedging strategy, using the combination of cooperative and competitive strategic instruments. Considering the security architecture dominated by sea in Asia-Pacific, this study aims to assess South Korea's blue-water navy program within the framework of its hedging strategy. It will be argued that a more powerful and capable navy will contribute to indirect balancing of China, main trading partner of South Korea and a key actor in dealing with North Korea and also reduce military overdependence of South Korea on the US, its main ally. Such an analysis will also allow reconsidering the roles of carriers in today's international security context.

Keywords: Aircraft carrier, Asia-Pacific, Blue-water navy, Hedging, South Korea.

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Öz

Asya-Pasifik'teki Çin-ABD rekabeti ve bölge ülkelerinin kesişen çıkarları, bölgesel güvenlik ikilemini ve iki büyük güç arasında güç geçişi tartışmalarını beraberinde getirmiştir. Bölgenin gelecekteki durumu hakkındaki bu belirsizlik, Güney Kore'yi iş birlikçi ve rekabetçi dış politika araçlarının bir arada kullanılmasını öngören "hedging" stratejisini izlemeye itmiştir. Bu çalışmanın amacı, Asya-Pasifik'in deniz gücünün ciddi ehemmiyet arz ettiği bir bölge olduğundan hareketle, Güney Kore'nin açık deniz donanması programını "hedging" stratejisi çerçevesinde ele almaktır. Daha güçlü ve yetenekli bir donanma gücünün, hem Güney Kore'nin bir numaralı ticaret ortağı ve Kuzey Kore sorununun çözümünde temel aktör olan Çin'in tehdit edilmeden dolaylı olarak dengelenmesine, hem de Güney Kore'nin en önemli müttefiki olan ABD'ye askerî alandaki aşırı bağımlılığının azaltılmasına katkıda bulunacağı ifade edilecektir. Ayrıca bu analiz, günümüz uluslararası güvenlik ortamında uçak gemilerinin rolünün yeniden değerlendirilmesine de olanak sağlayacaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Uçak gemisi, Asya-Pasifik, Açık deniz donanması, Hedging, Güney Kore.

66

Security
Strategies
Year: 13
Issue: 25

1. Introduction

The dramatic rise of countries outside Europe and North America has reshaped contemporary international relations. Asia's remarkable economic performance, demographic trends, increasing military strength, and global political position led to debates over whether the 21st century should be called the "Asian century". Even though East and South Asian countries made significant economic progress over the course of the last three decades, it would not be wrong to say that the rise of China has been the main source of change in the Asia-Pacific. China's role in regional order has remarkably increased due to its economic and military power, demonstrating that "economic wealth and military

power become increasingly synonymous.”¹ This role caused changes in the distribution of power, causing not only global change of power to the Asia-Pacific region, but also shifts between actors within the region.

China's growing role in regional order and the US desire to maintain its position of regional preponderance, leading to a power transition debate, has created uncertainty about the future landscape of the region. This uncertainty has inevitably reflected on bilateral and regional relations, and pushed regional actors to reconsider their foreign policy strategies. Both great powers and middle/small powers have various foreign policy options, such as balancing, containment, bandwagoning, buck-passing, etc.

Apart from these largely explored ones, hedging, derived from the financial terminology is another foreign policy strategy. There is a lack of consensus on a common definition of this notion, theoretically least analyzed. It means an investment position intended to offset potential losses or gains that may be incurred by a companion investment.² The notion of hedging began to be used in International Relations (IR) literature in 2000s. Evelyn Goh defines it as “a set of strategies aimed at avoiding (or planning for contingencies in) a situation in which states cannot decide upon more straightforward alternatives such as balancing, bandwagoning, or neutrality.”³ When hedging, states have possibility to employ a mix of various strategic instruments including engagement, enmeshment, balancing, and restraining. Hence, hedging should be distinguished from classical strategic choices of states, such as balancing and containment, to face a changing balance of power or the rise of a

¹ Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1981, p. 124.

² Antonio Fiori and Andrea Passeri, “Hedging in Search of a New Age of Non-Alignment: Myanmar between China and the US”, SISP Conference, Firenze, 12-14 September 2013, p.8.

³ Evelyn Goh, “Understanding Hedging in Asia-Pacific Security”, Japanese Institute of Global Communication, 2006, www.glocom.org/debates/20060901_goh_understand/index.html (Access date: 20.04.2016).

new influent power as this new notion explicitly includes engagement.

The new political realm of the Asia-Pacific, reshaped by the rise of China, has allowed scholars to apply the notion of hedging in order to analyze new complex relations between the US and China, as well as between regional actors and these two strongest powers. Within the scope of hedging strategy, states can use a combination of cooperative and competitive strategic instruments as insurance against unclear intentions of target state. For example, the hedging strategies of the US and China towards each other involve engagement and integration mechanisms on one hand, balancing in the form of security cooperation with regional countries and military build-up in the Asia-Pacific on the other hand.

Hedging is the core strategy in today's security environment, not only for great powers, but also for other regional powers, due to economic interdependency and growing security concerns. Given that today's international conjuncture is rather different than the atmosphere of the Cold War and there is robust economic engagement between the US and China, it does not seem possible for the former to contain the latter. Therefore, the US tries to hedge China by enhancing military capabilities in East Asia and improving its power projection ability.⁴ In response to the US hedging strategy, China strengthens its security arrangements and bilateral partnerships to tarnish the US hub and spoke alliance.⁵ As for secondary powers, their main purpose is to "avoid having to choose one side at the expense of another",⁶ considering economic benefits and the need for security cooperation. For instance, strengthening its alliance with the US, South Korea use hedging to prevent China from leading or dominating the regional order, while also developing its economic relations with this country. Besides, the anarchical security

⁴ Richard Weitz, "Meeting the China Challenges: Some Insights from Scenario-Based Planning", *The Journal of Strategic Studies*, 2001, Vol: 24, No: 3, 19-48, p. 26.

⁵ Robert Manning and James Przystup, "Asia's Transition Diplomacy: Hedging against Futureshock", *Survival-Global Politics and Strategy*, 1999, Vol: 41, No: 3, p. 43-68.

⁶ Evelyn Goh, "Understanding Hedging in Asia-Pacific security".

architecture causing a persistent distrustful environment⁷ leads these secondary powers to establish new alliances and strengthen their military capabilities as ways of balancing, while also seeking to maximize their economic benefits by pragmatically forging commercial links.

The effectiveness and sustainability of a hedging strategy derive from the ability to avoid giving the image of an antagonistic state. However, this does not mean that hedging strategy ignores military power or defense capability. On the contrary, almost all scholars working on hedging in IR emphasize more or less the importance of security-related elements⁸, as long as this component does not lead to a pure-balancing strategy in favor of one side. The complex security environment of the Asia-Pacific prompt regional actors to improve their military power -especially naval capabilities- since mutual maritime activities creating action-reaction dynamics have led to a rigorous naval competition in the region. Consequently, the Asia-Pacific has witnessed a severe naval build-up and a visible increase in the number of big ships, classified as amphibious ships, helicopter destroyers or aircraft carriers in an attempt to improve naval power. While the US has six carriers stationed in the region, China has officially announced the construction of its second aircraft carrier at the end of 2015. Japan also launched its second Izumo-class helicopter carrier in 2015.

⁷ Van Jackson, "The Rise and Persistence of Strategic Hedging across Asia: A system-level analysis" In Ashley Tellis, Abraham Denmark and Greg Chaffin (eds.), *US Alliances and Partnerships*, NBR, Washington, 2014, 316-342, p. 322.

⁸ See for example, Art, R. J., "Europe hedges its security bets" In T.V. Paul, J. J. Wirtz and M. Fortman (eds.), *Balance of Power: Theory and Practice in 21st Century*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2004, p. 179-213; Manning R., and Przystup J., "Asia's Transition Diplomacy: Hedging against future shock", *Survival-Global Politics and Strategy*, 1999, vol. 41, no. 3, p. 43-68; Park, J., "The US-led alliance in the Asia-Pacific: Hedge against Potential Threats or an Undesirable Multilateral Security Order?", *Pacific Review*, 2011, vol. 24, no. 2, p. 137-158; Roy, D., "Southeast Asia and China: Balancing or Bandwagoning?", *Contemporary Southeast Asia: A Journal of International & Strategic Affairs*, 2005, vol. 27, no. 2, p. 305-322; Weitz, R., "Meeting the China challenges: Some insights from scenario-based planning", *The Journal of Strategic Studies*, 2001, vol. 24, no. 3, p. 19-48.

Aircraft carriers should be considered as an important part of security realm of hedging, since the security architecture in Asia-Pacific is dominated by sea. These vessels are seen as a status of symbol along with playing a considerable role to carry out oceanic operations such as sea denial, sea control, flag showing, and power projection. Relationship between power and aircraft carrier is the main reason that pushes regional countries to possess these huge vessels within the context of hedging strategy, since hedging aims to reduce risks, expand freedom of action, and shape other actor's choices.

South Korea is one of the regional countries which opted to hedge, rather than choosing pure-balancing or pure-bandwagoning, considering a possible shift in the global/regional distribution of power and lasting regional security dilemma. Seoul intends to strengthen its military alliance with the US, while also seeking to develop a stronger partnership with Beijing. Taking into account the naval dimension of the US-China competition for regional influence, ongoing maritime disputes, and regional rivalry between secondary powers, South Korea accelerated its blue-water navy program, which implicitly includes the possession of an aircraft carrier in order to strengthen its hand in pursuing hedging strategy. The present study aims to assess the significance of joining to the aircraft carrier club for South Korea within the framework of its hedging strategy. Such an analysis will also allow reconsidering the roles of carriers in today's international relations and international security context.

70

Security
Strategies
Year: 13
Issue: 25

2. Power Transition Debates and the Complex Security Environment of Northeast Asia

During the Cold War, the rivalry between the US and the USSR over spheres of influence had significant effects in Northeast Asia. Especially after the Korean War, a balance of power between the US-led coalition of Japan, South Korea, Taiwan and the continental powers of the USSR and China became more apparent in this region. Military balance was one of the most important factors to preserve stability of the region. The presence of US troops and military bases in Japan, South Korea, Taiwan and the presence of the US 7th fleet in the Indo-Asia-Pacific region have guaranteed security of these countries

against the Soviet or Chinese invasion.

This regional security architecture began to change in the post-Cold War era, largely as a result of the economic development of China, and its concomitant military modernization. Considering the impact of China's rise on the international system, some scholars has argued that the US and China are engaged in a power transition process⁹, applying Kenneth Organski's power transition theory to the rise of China. According to Organski, throughout history, shifts in the balance of power have led to struggles among great powers.¹⁰ Put another way, power transitions are often the results of wars, since the second-ranked big nations, which dissatisfied with the existing international order, challenge to the dominant nation. Regarding the US-China power transition, even though it is unlikely that these highly interdependent countries will initiate war, China's challenge to US supremacy becomes more and more visible in the Asia-Pacific.

Northeast Asia is one of the regions where the impacts of US-China power transition process are largely felt. Although Beijing often emphasizes the idea of a peaceful rise, its increasing military spending, military modernization, cyber warfare capacity, and anti-satellite technology arouse concerns. The Taiwan issue, territorial disputes, competition for influence in the South China Sea, security of its

⁹ See for example: Chan, Steve, *China, The US and Power Transition Theory*, Routledge, New York, 2008; Lai, David. "The United States and China in Power Transition", Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, December 2011; Tammen, Ronald L., Kugler, Jacek, Lemke, Douglas, Alsharabati, Carole, Efird, Brian and Organski, Abramo, F. K., *Power Transitions: Strategies for the 21st Century*, New York: Seven Bridges Press, 2000; Beeson, Mark, "Hegemonic transition in East Asia? The Dynamics of Chinese and American Power", *Review of International Studies*, 2009, vol. 35, no. 1, pp. 95-112; Goldstein, Avery, "Power Transitions, Institutions, and China's Rise in East Asia: Theoretical Expectations and Evidence", *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 2007, vol. 30, no. 4, p. 639-682; Levy, Jack S., "Power Transition Theory and the Rise of China." In Ross, Robert S. and Zhu, Feng (eds), *China's Ascent: Power, Security, and the Future of International Politics*, Cornell University Press, New York, 2008.

¹⁰ Abramo F. K. Organski, *World Politics*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1969.

maritime commerce, and its energy supply are the main factors for China's military rise.

In addition to the rise of China, Japan's steps towards military normalization, North Korea's nuclear tests, and the growing economic and military strength of South Korea shape the complex security environment of Northeast Asia. This is why rather than focusing only to two strongest powers; it would be useful to take a broader view to better understand the complex security architecture in the region. Van Jackson draws attention to the persistent inability of states to trust the intentions of one another in an anarchical security environment.¹¹ The increasing influence of China in the Asia-Pacific region and its military power, disputes over Senkaku/Diaoyu and Dokdo/Takeshima islands, growing doubts about US security guarantees because of the US shrinking military budget, the American people's war fatigue and several crises in Eastern Europe and the Middle East have pushed the Shinzo Abe government to rethink Japan's pacifist constitution and move towards military normalization. The hike of its military spending (Japan increased its military budget for the first time in eleven years in 2013), the creation of a National Security Council and the publication of its first strategy paper, the lift of the self imposed ban on weapons exports and the reinterpretation of the Article 9 of the Constitution to allow the Self Defense Forces to engage in collective self defense were the main steps for this purpose.

The security threat posed by North Korea's belligerent posture towards the US, South Korea, and Japan, its aggressive rhetoric and its survival strategy of acquiring nuclear weapon is a major source of concern for regional security and stability. Pyongyang's interest in a nuclear weapons program reaches back to the end of the Second World War. It already conducted three nuclear tests in 2006, 2009, and 2013. In spite of economic and political sanctions and the Six Party Talks aiming to end North Korea's nuclear program through negotiations, Pyongyang

¹¹ Van Jackson, , "The Rise and Persistence of Strategic Hedging across Asia", p. 318.

Blue-Water Navy Program
as a Part of South Korea's Hedging Strategy

continues its efforts to develop nuclear weapon capability and the means of delivery. North Korea's middle range missiles can reach Japan, South Korea, and the US state of Alaska. Moreover, it is known that Pyongyang takes steps to field an intercontinental ballistic missile that could threaten the US mainland.

Within this regional context, South Korea has opted to hedge rather than pure-balancing or pure-bandwagoning. John Ikenberry emphasizes that "Asia is experiencing the emergence of a dual hierarchy: a security hierarchy, with the US at the apex, and an economic hierarchy dominated by China."¹² South Korea feels heavily the effects of this hierarchical order, which prompt Seoul to engage in hedging strategies. South Korea uses hedging to prevent China from leading or dominating the regional order. Hence, its alliance with the US is a key element of this strategy. Meanwhile, it continues to strengthen its economic and political ties with China, since South Korea is heavily dependent on trade with China as its main trading partner. This dependence pushes Seoul to pursue economic pragmatism. Besides, considering China's role in regional order and its alliance with North Korea, Seoul attaches importance to development of strong diplomatic relations with Beijing, as the attendance of the President Park Geun-hye at the military parade in Beijing on September 3, 2015 to commemorate the 70th anniversary of victory in the Second World War and its participation to the China led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank demonstrated. North Korea originated threats, China's future strategic intentions (considering the Socotra Rock dispute with China and the increasing influence of China in the East China Sea), and the concern over America's long term presence in the Asia-Pacific are the key drivers of South Korea's military spending and modernization efforts. Strengthening its defense and deterrence capabilities, South Korea intends to improve its position within the US alliance system in East Asia, enhance its leverage in dealing with Beijing, and strengthen its hand in regional rivalry over influence

¹² Andrew O'Neil, "Middle Power Hedges against China", *Real Clear Defense*, December 4, 2015.

in the region. Besides, the geopolitical situation in Northeast Asia, and overlapping sovereignty claims at sea, and also energy and maritime security issues lead South Korea to reinforce its naval capabilities.

3. Naval Rivalry in the Region

Naval power occupies an important place in security and defense policies of China, Japan, South Korea, and North Korea as coastal countries. A significant share of the defense budgets is allocated to the navy, and naval modernization efforts still continue. These maritime activities, creating action-reaction dynamics, have embroiled Northeast Asia in a severe naval competition.

Taking into account its losses of sovereignty from European powers and Japan that came from sea,¹³ China has been giving special importance to naval power since the Mao era. In line with its rapid and extensive economic growth and rising defense spending, China has recently increased its activities in the maritime domain in order to address the Taiwan problem, defend China's territorial claims in the East and South China Sea, enforce China's view with regard to the limits of the exclusive economic zone, secure its maritime commerce and energy supply, reduce US influence in the region, and assert China's status as a leading regional power.

For more than two decades, China has engaged in a military build-up and, as a result, it has become a considerable military power on a global scale. Regarding navy, Beijing's 2015 Military Strategy Paper explicitly indicates that "the traditional mentality that land outweighs sea must be abandoned, and great importance has to be attached to managing the seas and oceans..." and "People's Liberation Army (PLA) Navy will gradually shift its focus from "offshore waters defense" to the combination of "offshore waters defense" with "open seas protection".¹⁴ As a reflection of special importance given to naval power, the PLA Navy has been

¹³ Michael McDevitt, *Northeast Asia Security Environment: Moving toward a New Reality*, CSIS Report, 2005, p. 3.

¹⁴ "Documents: China's Military Strategy", *USNI News*, May 26, 2015.

Blue-Water Navy Program
as a Part of South Korea's Hedging Strategy

undergoing a qualitative revolution in its equipment to carry out comprehensive offshore operations and develop blue-water capabilities. China's naval forces include some 77 principal surface combatants, more than 60 submarines, 55 medium and large amphibious ships, roughly 85 missile equipped small combatants and one aircraft carrier.¹⁵ Placing a high priority on the modernization of its submarine force, China continues the production of JIN-class nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines. The next generation JIN-class submarines will carry the new JL-2 submarine launched ballistic missile with an estimated range of 7,400 km.¹⁶ Beijing also endeavors to improve its force of nuclear-powered (SHANG-class) and diesel-powered (KILO-class, SONG-class and YUAN-class) attack submarines. According to Geoffrey Till, Japan's submarine expansion plan aims to counter the perceived weakness of China's submarine warfare capabilities.¹⁷ The Military Balance, published by International Institute for Strategic Studies, draws attention to the quality of Chinese vessels, especially the Type-052C and the new Type-052D destroyers, which allow for the deployment of anti-air, anti-ship and even land attack cruise missiles.¹⁸ Also, the littoral patrol fleet was strengthened with new Type-056 corvettes. Besides, according to media reports, after the commission of "Liaoning" in 2012, China is building a second aircraft carrier, estimated to be completed by 2018.¹⁹

As the US primary competitor in the Asia-Pacific, China invests in "anti-access/area-denial" capabilities intended to weaken US capacity to project power in the region. This approach aims to deter US intervention in a conflict in China's near seas region over Taiwan or some other

75

Güvenlik
Stratejileri

Yıl: 13

Sayı: 25

¹⁵ "Quadrennial Defense Review Report", US Department of Defense, February 2010, p. 10, http://www.defense.gov/Portals/1/features/defenseReviews/QDR/QDR_as_of_29JAN10_1600.pdf.

¹⁶ "Quadrennial Defense Review Report", p. 9

¹⁷ Geoffrey Till, *Asia's Naval Expansion: An Arms Race in the Making?*, Routledge, London, 2012, p. 23.

¹⁸ "Asia", *The Military Balance*, 2015, p. 207-208.

¹⁹ Shanon Tiezzi, "Chinese Admirals spill the beans on new aircraft carrier", *The Diplomat*, March 12, 2015.

issue, or failing that, delay the arrival or reduce the effectiveness of intervening US forces.²⁰ For this purpose, Beijing heavily invests in attack submarines, land based ballistic and cruise missiles, long range radars and surveillance satellites. This investment is also crucial for breaking through the “first island chain blockade”, composed of the first major archipelagos off the East Asian continental mainland, including the Kuril Islands, Japanese Archipelago, Ryukyu Islands, Taiwan, the northern Philippines and Borneo. Besides, China seeks a permanent presence in the Indian Ocean through its “string of pearls” strategy in order to secure its sea lines of communication, increase access to ports and airfields and foster stronger diplomatic relationships with trading partners.²¹ These “pearls” include Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Bangladesh, and Pakistan. Additionally, the joint exercises between the Iranian and Chinese navies in 2014, focusing on anti piracy and rescue operation and the joint Sino-Russian maritime exercise in the Mediterranean Sea in 2015 show Beijing’s intention to expand its ability to operate in far flung waters, as well as its growing interest in Africa and the Middle East.

In response to China’s growing naval presence in the Asia-Pacific and its asymmetrical anti-naval capabilities, the US has strengthened its powerful naval and air forces in the region and has put into effect its Air Sea Battle strategy. Covering the Pacific, Arctic and Indian Oceans, the US Navy’s Pacific Fleet is the Navy’s largest fleet and the Pacific Air Forces Command is the largest US Air Force Command with bases in Hawaii, Japan, South Korea, Guam, and Alaska. As for the Air Sea Battle strategy, it aims to counter to the anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) threats, integrating air and naval capabilities. The US Department of Defense’s Quadrennial Defense Review published in 2010 stated that “The Air Force and Navy together are developing a new joint air-sea battle concept for defeating adversaries across the range of military operations, including adversaries equipped with sophisticated anti-access

²⁰ “Documents: China’s Military Strategy”.

²¹ Christopher J. Pehrson, “String of Pearls: Meeting the Challenge of China’s Rising Power Across the Asian Littoral”, *Strategic Studies Institute*, July 2006, p. v.

Blue-Water Navy Program
as a Part of South Korea's Hedging Strategy

and area-denial capabilities. The concept will address how air and naval forces will integrate capabilities across all operational domains -air, sea, land, space, and cyberspace- to counter growing challenges to US freedom of action".²² This strategy was renamed to Joint Concept for Access and Maneuver in the Global Commons in 2015. Japanese, South Korean, and Taiwanese support as regional allies is a key factor for successful implementation of this strategy.

Japan's Maritime Self Defense Force (JMSDF) is one of the most powerful and modern navy in the Asia-Pacific, in spite of a historically low military spending and a pacifistic constitution. In order to enhance its response capabilities for various missions, Japan decided to increase the number of destroyers from 48 to 54.²³ Furthermore, Japan has four Kongo-class and two Atago-class destroyers equipped with Aegis combat system. Two Aegis destroyers will be added by 2020 against Chinese and North Korean ballistic missile developments.²⁴ Since Japan aims to improve its power projection capabilities, it has engaged in the production of Osumi-class landing ship, Landing Craft Air Cushion-class hovercraft, Hyuga-class helicopter destroyer and Izumo-class helicopter destroyer. The last one is the largest surface combatant in the Japanese fleet to date with a 27,000 tons displacement when fully loaded and with a length of 248 meters.²⁵ The ship is designed to accommodate up to 14 helicopters. Because of its size, this ship is alleged by China to be an aircraft carrier in disguise, the production of which is banned under constitution. In terms of submarines, JMSDF has two Harushio-class, eleven Oyashio-class, and five Soryu-class submarines. It will also maintain the augmented submarine fleet in order to effectively conduct patrol and defense of the seas surrounding Japan, as well as regularly

²² "Quadrennial Defense Review Report", p. 32.

²³ "National Defense Program Guidelines for FY 2014 and Beyond", Japan Ministry of Defense, December 17, 2013, p. 23.

²⁴ "National Defense Program Guidelines for FY 2014 and Beyond", p. 24.

²⁵ Franz-Stephan Gady, "Japan's New Helicopter Carrier: Bad News for Chinese Subs?", *The Diplomat*, March 28, 2015.

engage in broad underwater intelligence gathering, warning, and surveillance in those seas.²⁶ Japan also plans to acquire three reconnaissance drones, four more refueling tankers, four more maritime patrol aircraft, and 28 F-35 jet fighters by 2019.²⁷ Although China has more offensive weapons and projection power, it would not be wrong to say that Japan maintains its technological superiority.²⁸ Besides, it should be noted that the Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security grants US the right to have military bases on the archipelago in exchange for a US pledge to defend Japan in the event of an attack. Thus, Japan is home to several US bases and around 37,000 US troops.

Despite of the difficulty in obtaining reliable information on North Korea's armed forces, it is possible to say that its military equipment is mainly in a poor state. It is reported that one of its submarine chasers and one of its smaller patrol boats sank during maneuvers in the Sea of Japan/East Sea in 2013.²⁹ North Korea's Soviet era Romeo-class submarines lack any missile capabilities and can only fire short-range Cold War vintage torpedoes.³⁰ Most of the North Korea's strong green-water fleet is at least 30 years old and does not operate more than 50 miles offshore. North Korea has recently built a new high speed, wave-piercing craft to deploy troops, a stealth ship destroyer and two helicopter frigates to enhance its anti-submarine warfare capabilities. Although North Korea maintains a considerable number of patrol and coastal combatant and amphibious landing crafts, they are largely obsolete. Pyongyang hence relies on its asymmetric capabilities (including electronic and cyber warfare) and the deployment of short-range Scud

²⁶ "National Defense Program Guidelines for FY 2014 and Beyond", p. 27.

²⁷ "Defense of Japan 2015", Japan Ministry of Defense, 2015, p. 245.

²⁸ Liu Ming, "Northeast Asia Order after WWII: Continuity, Compliance, Power-Transition and Challenges", *The Korean Journal of Defense Analysis*, 2015, Vol: 27, No: 2, 163-186, p. 177.

²⁹ Samantha Stainburn, "North Korea Admits that One of Its Navy Ship Has Sunk, Killing Sailors", *Global Post*, November 4, 2013.

³⁰ Koh Swee Lean Collin, "North Korea's Asymmetric Submarine Doctrine", *The Diplomat*, July 23, 2014.

Blue-Water Navy Program
as a Part of South Korea's Hedging Strategy

missiles to deter the US and South Korea. In addition to pursuing nuclear weapons capability, with three devices tested in 2006, 2009, and 2013, Pyongyang gives priority to its ballistic missile program. Following the development of the Taepodong-2 missile with an expected range of 5,000-6,000 km, North Korea has theoretically gained capability to strike all countries in Southeast Asia, as well as the western side of the US.

Concerning the South Korean Navy (ROKN), it could be mentioned that Seoul's strategic focus has become far more maritime in nature. The ROKN has acquired a substantial fleet of modern and powerful ships in line with its aspiration to have a strong blue-water navy, which was first proposed by Admiral An Byong-tae in 1995. Today South Korea's Navy acquires six Chungmugong Yi Sun-Shin class general purpose destroyers, three Gwanggaeto the Great class destroyers, and three Sejong the Great class (KDX-III) guided missile destroyers. It is acknowledged that South Korea will build another six equipped with the Aegis radar system between 2019 and 2026.³¹ South Korea's frigate force consists of nine Ulsan-class and one Incheon-class frigates. The Ulsan-class is to be replaced with six ships of the new Incheon-class frigate, which displace 2,000 tons and have Sea Sparrow missiles. South Korea has also a large patrol craft force consisting of 74 Chamsuri-class patrol crafts. The ROKN amphibious fleet has gotten a major upgrade with the construction of one more Dokdo-class helicopter carrier, which is capable of carrying some 750 marines, landing crafts, and up to 10 helicopters. As for submarines, South Korea will replace its nine German made Type-209 submarines with Type-214 class, which are larger than the Type-209 class, but have roughly the same performance and armament.³² Regarding naval aviation, the ROKN has about 20 aircrafts and 50 helicopters.

Moreover, in 2011 South Korea began the construction of its newest naval bases on Jeju Island located southwest of the Korean

³¹ Kyle Mizokami, "Two Koreas, Three Navies", *USNI News*, May 8, 2014.

³² Kyle Mizokami, "Two Koreas, Three Navies".

Peninsula and on Ulleung Island located east of the Korean Peninsula and the closest territory to the disputed islets of Dokdo. It should be noted that these bases will be closer to islets disputed with China and Japan respectively. The ROKN considers it “a tactical and strategic point to secure southern sea lanes for transporting energy supplies and to conduct mobile operations in the case of emergency in the region.”³³ Besides, except for annual joint naval exercises with the US, South Korea’s Navy participates in naval exercise with regional countries such as India and Thailand.

These efforts of Seoul can be explained by “soft or indirect balancing” option which constitute a component of hedging in terms of risk-contingency measures.³⁴ The aim of this option is to reduce the risks originated by the rising power through military means without directly targeting it, while also gaining advantageous position in regional competition over influence. South Korea’s maritime activities have not overtly targeted China’s naval presence in the region, even though they contribute to the US hub and spoke alliance in East Asia. Concerning its ambition to develop a blue-water navy, Seoul meticulously notes that its purpose is to boost the country’s international status. Admiral Byoung-Tae, former chief of naval operations, stated that “the navy should also be able to operate as a member of a multinational coalition, which would enable the South Korean government to play a greater role in international efforts.”³⁵ Seoul thus aims to give its neighbors a message that, taking into account potential threats or risks to regional security and stability, the development of a more powerful navy isn’t just in South Korea’s interests. Since South Korea has many reasons to maintain good relations with its neighbors, the ROKN has refrained from taking any specific operational measures in response to their actions.

³³ Sung-ki Jung, “Jeju to Open Eco-friendly Naval Base in 2014”, *Korea Times*, September 23, 2009.

³⁴ Cheng Chwee Kuik, “The Essence of Hedging: Malaysia and Singapore's Response to a Rising China”, *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, 2008, Vol: 30, No: 2, 159-185.

³⁵ Mingi Hyun, “South Korea’s Blue-water Ambition”, *The Diplomat*, November 18, 2010.

However, its blue-water navy initiative aiming to project power should be considered as an answer to regional security dilemma and China's uncertain future strategic direction.³⁶ This initiative would also foster South Korea's own ability to operate in near seas. Therefore, the possession of an aircraft carrier, essential blue-water ship, should be assessed as a part of South Korea's hedging strategy.

4. Functions of Aircraft Carriers

Aircraft carriers played a considerable role in the Second World War, changing the nature of naval combat. They "supported major landing operations; raided and interdicted warship and shipping movement on the high seas and in the littoral; attacked and destroyed shore installations and facilities; protected merchant shipping against submarine, surface, and air attack; and hunted submarine and surface raiders."³⁷ The 1941 Japanese surprise attack on Pearl Harbor illustrated the importance of the power projection capability provided by aircraft carriers. Since the air superiority became a determining factor during the war, belligerent powers started to create a number of carriers. This extensive usage required the construction of several new light carriers which was smaller but faster, such as *USS Independence*.

The world's naval situation radically changed at the end of the Second World War. Aircraft carrier became the capital ship of the fleet instead of the battleship. Along with the increase in size, the new class aircraft carriers were also equipped with more firepower to reduce their vulnerability to attack by other ships, aircraft, submarines or missiles.

Nonetheless, the high coast to acquire a giant floating airport with its aircrafts and helicopters, complete with anti-aircraft missile batteries, radars, and other defense systems, and operating with its large number of escorts limits the expansion of the aircraft carrier club.

³⁶ Terence Roehrig, "Strengthening the ROK-US Alliance", *The Asan Forum*, June 11, 2015, <http://www.theasanforum.org/option-2-strengthening-the-rok-us-alliance/>.

³⁷ Paul Fontenoy, *Aircraft Carriers: An illustrated History of Their Impact*, ABC-CLIO, California, 2006, p. 111.

Excluding landing helicopter dock or helicopter destroyer, today only a few countries (Brazil, China, France, India, Italy, Russia, Spain, Thailand, the UK, and the US) have aircraft carriers in their navies' inventory. Having 10 Nimitz-class³⁸ aircraft carriers in service, the United States fields the largest modern carrier force in the world. Moreover, three Ford-class³⁹ super carriers are under construction. As for other countries, India possesses two carriers (*INS Viraat*⁴⁰ and *INS Vikramaditya*⁴¹) in service and two new carriers under construction; China has one carrier (*Liaoning*)⁴² in service and one carrier under construction; Italy possesses two carriers (*Giuseppe Garibaldi*⁴³ and *Cavour*⁴⁴) in

³⁸ With over 6,000 personnel (crew and aircrew), the nuclear-powered carrier has a displacement of 102.000 long tons, and an overall length of 332.8 meters. Its name comes from US Pacific Fleet Commander Admiral Chester W. Nimitz. The first of its class, USS Nimitz, was commissioned in 1975 (America's Navy).

³⁹ Gerald R. Ford class supercarriers will replace US Navy's existing Nimitz class carriers. With an overall length of 337 meters and full-load displacements of over 100.000 long tons, these supercarriers will be the largest warships. Carriers of the Ford-class will be built with a higher level of technology: advanced arresting gear, automation, updated missile system, advanced dual-band radar, advanced aircraft launch system, stealth features and ability to carry up to 90 aircrafts. The first of class is scheduled to be delivered in 2016 (America's Navy).

⁴⁰ This British-built ship is the oldest carrier in service in the world. With an overall length of 226.5 meters and full-load displacement of 28.700 tons, this carrier can carry up to 30 aircrafts (Indian Navy).

⁴¹ Entering into service with the Indian navy in 2013, this Kiev-class carrier has a displacement of 45.400 tons and an overall length of 283.5 meters. It can carry 36 aircrafts (Indian Navy).

⁴² This ex-Soviet Navy carrier was sold to China by Ukraine and after being completely rebuilt, it was commissioned into the Chinese Navy in 2012. This Kuznetsov class carrier has a displacement of 54.000 tons and an overall length of 304.5 meters. It can carry 36 fixed wing and rotary wing aircrafts (Global Security).

⁴³ Commissioned in 1985, this carrier has a displacement of 10.000 tons and an overall length of 180 meters. Involved in combat air operations off Somalia, Kosovo, Afghanistan, and Libya, it can carry up to 18 aircrafts (Italian Ministry of Defense).

⁴⁴ With an overall length of 244 meters and full-load displacements of over 27.000 long tons, this carrier was commissioned in 2008. Being able to carry 20 aircrafts, *Cavour* was dispatched to Haiti as part of Italy's operation for Haiti earthquake relief (Italian Ministry of Defense).

Blue-Water Navy Program
as a Part of South Korea's Hedging Strategy

service; Spain (*Juan Carlos*⁴⁵), France (Charles de Gaulle⁴⁶), Russia (*Admiral Kuznetsov*⁴⁷), Brazil (*Sao Paulo*⁴⁸) and Thailand (*HTMS Chakri Naruebet*⁴⁹) each have one carrier in service. The UK Royal Navy's two new carriers (*HMS Queen Elizabeth*⁵⁰ and *HMS Prince of Wales*⁵¹) are expected to enter into service in 2016 and 2018 respectively.

Along with its excessive pricing, carrier is subjected to criticism, because of its vulnerability due to advanced missile technology and ultra stealthy submarines, and its diminishing military effectiveness in today's modern threat environment. Considering these factors, carrier skeptics question the relevance of aircraft carriers in future naval operations.⁵² These disincentives do not, however, seem to discourage countries from developing aircraft carrier programs, as these ships continue to play important roles in navies.

⁴⁵ Launched in 2009, this carrier has a displacement of 26.000 tons and an overall length of 230 meters and can carry 25-30 aircrafts (Spanish Ministry of Defense).

⁴⁶ This nuclear-powered carrier was commissioned in 2001. It has a displacement of 37.000 tons and an overall length of 261.5 meters, and it can carry 28-40 aircrafts. France sent *Charles de Gaulle* to Indian Ocean in support of US-led operation against Taliban and to Arabian Sea due to Indian-Pakistani crisis (*French Ministry of Defense*).

⁴⁷ With full-load displacement of 55.200 tons and an overall length of 305 meters, this Soviet carrier can carry 41-52 aircrafts (Naval Technology).

⁴⁸ Commissioned in 1963 by the French Navy, this carrier was transferred to Brazil in 2000. It has full-load displacement of 32.800 tons and an overall length of 265 meters. It can carry 39 aircrafts (Brazilian Ministry of Defense).

⁴⁹ Constructed by Spanish shipbuilder, it was commissioned in 1997. With full-load displacement of 11.486 tons and an overall length of 182.6 meters, this Soviet carrier can carry up to 15 aircrafts. It has been deployed on several disaster relief operations (Global Security).

⁵⁰ Scheduled to commission in early 2017, it will be the largest warship ever built for the Royal Navy with a displacement of 70.600 tons and an overall length of 280 meters. It can carry up to 40 aircrafts (Royal Navy).

⁵¹ Scheduled to commission in 2020, it has a displacement of 70.600 tons and an overall length of 280 meters. It can carry up to 40 aircrafts like *HMS Queen Elizabeth* (Royal Navy).

⁵² David Isenberg, "The Illusion of Power: Aircraft Carriers and US Military Strategy." *Cato Institute Policy Analysis*, no. 4, 1990.

First of all, it helps to avoid dependency to another country's ground bases or airspace as an aircraft carrier is a miniature airbase on the seas. During Bosnia War in the early 1990s, UK's aircraft carrier helped to maintain the no-fly zone over Bosnia and British aircrafts carried out numerous operations during the war.

In the event of combat, aircraft carrier is useful not only to provide striking power, but also air cover. Italy's *Giuseppe Garibaldi* took part in the 2011 military intervention in Libya with the objective to participate in strike air-ground operations.

An aircraft carrier can carry a huge number of troops during war, military intervention, peacekeeping or humanitarian operation. This capacity reduces the cost of troop transportation and gives ability to move fast.

It can be used to ensure air support to landing operations. For example, France dispatched *Charles de Gaulle* to the Indian Ocean in support of Operation Enduring Freedom against Taliban in 2001.

An aircraft carrier can also support a no-fly zone established in a military context. Washington sent the *USS Enterprise* to support a no-fly zone over Libya during the 2011 Libya intervention.

In combat oriented situations, it can provide a coordinated situational awareness and analysis platform which are critical to preventing errors and being able to adapt to situations in a timely manner.

As it offers a considerable mobility and flexibility, it can help to keep the sea lines of communication secure. This is one of the main reasons why China wants a second aircraft carrier. Since China is very dependent on free passage of its merchant traffic, especially through the Malacca Strait, it is of prime importance for China to protect its sea lines of communication.

Aircraft carrier can effectively contribute to humanitarian operations due to its capacity to deploy several rescue helicopters and it can bring back home hundreds of citizens from a foreign country in case of emergency. The aircraft carrier *USS George Washington* contributed to the relief operation in the typhoon ravaged central Philippines in 2013.

Blue-Water Navy Program
as a Part of South Korea's Hedging Strategy

Aircraft carriers also play a threatening role in today's asymmetric warfare, like the gunboat diplomacy of the past. The notion of gunboat diplomacy, coined by James Cable, can be considered a starting point for using naval force as a form of coercive diplomacy.⁵³ Even though gunboat diplomacy was a tool of foreign policy during the Age of Imperialism, using naval forces, and especially aircraft carriers, to achieve foreign policy objectives still remains important. During the Indo-Pakistan Crisis of 1971, the US sent a task force, which included the *USS Enterprise* carrier to the Bay of Bengal to support Pakistan, its ally at the time. The UK sent *HMS Ark Royal* to the Adriatic in 1993/94 to help controlling the no-fly zone during the Bosnian War. These examples point out that states continue to use their carriers as a tool for bargaining, signaling, and coercing in foreign policy.⁵⁴

Because of its capacity to carry a huge number of troops and a considerable amount of fighter aircrafts very close to the shores of an adversary nation, a carrier serves as a potent deterrent. For example, after Iran's threat to close the Strait of Hormuz, US aircraft carrier *Abraham Lincoln* went through the Strait of Hormuz in 2012.

The arrival of an aircraft carrier to a regional port of call brings more diplomatic weight than an attack by a submarine or a destroyer, especially in a time of crisis. Russia sent its carrier on a port visit to Syria in 2013, as a sign of Moscow's long-term commitment to the regime of Assad.

Last, but not least, the powerful imagery and symbolism of carriers makes them potent status symbol.⁵⁵ Even though Thailand's

⁵³ James Cable defines gunboat diplomacy as "the use or threat of limited naval force, otherwise than as an act of war, in order to secure advantage or to avert loss, either in furtherance of an international dispute or else against foreign nationals within the territory or the jurisdiction of their own state" (James Cable, *Gunboat Diplomacy, 1919-1991*, Macmillan, London, 1994, p. 14).

⁵⁴ Robert Mandel, "The Effectiveness of Gunboat Diplomacy", *International Studies Quarterly*, 1986, Vol: 30, No: 1, 59-76, p. 60.

⁵⁵ Tom de Castella, "Does Anybody Still Need Aircraft Carriers?", *BBC News*, May

carrier, *Chakri Naruebet*, is the smallest aircraft carrier of the world, it gives Thai navy the prestige of being the only Southeast Asian navy to have a carrier.

5. From the Dokdo-class LPH to a Light Aircraft Carrier

As East Asia is a predominantly maritime region, any regional competition has inevitably a maritime dimension. This is why strong naval forces became an important part of South Korea's hedging strategy to deal with an uncertain future. Seoul hence began to make efforts to modernize and diversify its naval inventory. The Dokdo-class Landing Platform Helicopter (LPH), the largest and most remarkable ship in the South Korean Navy, was the result of these efforts.

Launched in 2005 and commissioned into the ROKN in 2007, this vessel displaces 14,000 tons empty and 18,000 tons fully loaded. It is capable of carrying up to 700 marines, 10 CH-60 helicopters, 10 armored vehicles, up to 200 vehicles, 15 helicopters, and two Landing Craft Air Cushion (LCAC) hovercrafts.⁵⁶ The flight deck can accommodate five helicopters, the size of Sikorsky S-70 Blackhawk/Seahawk simultaneously. Its well deck, accommodated to Amphibious Assault Vehicles (AAVs) and two LCACs, provides amphibious operation capability. Thanks to its ability to launch troop landings from both sea and air, it can conduct "over the horizon" amphibious operations, whereas there is always a risk of being fired upon by the enemy for a Landing Ship Tank, as it has to approach the coastline for landing. The Dokdo is a multi role vessel which can conduct a wide range of activities, military or nonmilitary, including UN peacekeeping operations and disaster relief. It was part of a task force conducting search and locate operations for the ROKN corvette *Cheonan* which had been sunk by a North Korean torpedo in 2010.

It is however possible to mention that South Korea is not willing to be satisfied with this remarkable ship, since it is already reported

29, 2012.

⁵⁶ "LPX Dokdo (Landing Platform Experimental) AmphibiousShip", Global Security, 2015, www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/rok/lp-x.htm (Access date : 23.04.2016).

Blue-Water Navy Program
as a Part of South Korea's Hedging Strategy

that this country considers deploying a light aircraft carrier by 2036 in line with its ambition to build a blue-water navy. According to a Defense News report that cited a South Korean navy source, “There are no fixed requirements at the moment, but the ways of launching light aircraft carriers over the next two decades have been studying.”⁵⁷ Chung Hee Soo of the ruling Saenuri Party stated that “to cope with potential maritime disputes with neighboring countries, we need to secure aircraft carriers as soon as possible.”⁵⁸ Considering South Korea’s regional and global ambitions and the high cost of an aircraft carrier with its aircrafts, it is possible to note that the ROKN would aim to build a 26,000-30,000 tons light aircraft carrier similar to Italian or Spanish aircraft carriers, which can support 20-30 aircrafts rather than a US Nimitz-class supercarrier. AV-8B Harrier V/STOL or F-35B STOVL aircrafts would most likely to be the choice of Seoul; nevertheless, Lockheed S-3 Viking which can be used for anti-submarine warfare, patrol, electronic intelligence, and aerial refueling can be a cheaper option for the ROKN. The KDX-III Aegis destroyers, Inchon-class frigate and Type 214 attack submarines would probably be the other components of the carrier battle group in order to defend the carrier against air and missile attack and against submarines -North Korea’s only offensive capabilities.

Even though aircraft carriers are expensive to build and to maintain, and they are vulnerable to air and missile attack, they still remain essential for oceanic operations, such as sea denial, sea control, flag showing, and power projection. The Dokdo LPH is considerably important naval asset for amphibious operations and humanitarian assistance. Nevertheless, naval maritime reconnaissance and fighter aviation are crucial to develop a blue-water navy and to acquire a strong naval power. Within this context, in military terms, a carrier allows to move tactical aircraft to distant theaters of war and give support, to respond rapidly to changing military situations, to support several missions at once, to serve as a

⁵⁷ Sung-ki Jung, “S. Korea Envisions Light Aircraft Carrier”, *Defense News*, October 26, 2013.

⁵⁸ Sung-ki Jung, “S. Korea Envisions Light Aircraft Carrier”.

mobile sovereign airbase and to remain on assignment for months. Their command, control, communications, and intelligence facilities reinforce carriers' versatility on the sea. One of the major advantages of aircraft carrier is to procure situational awareness over the opponents, taking into account the undeniable importance of having precise and real time knowledge of the locations of the enemy and allied forces.

Since South Korea's prime focus remains North Korea, an aircraft carrier would significantly strengthen deterrence against North Korea, packing serious combat capability. Thus, it may push Pyongyang to reconsider its reckless and aggressive acts, such as the sinking of the *Cheonan* in March 2010 and the bombardment of Yeonpyeong Island in November 2010. Moreover, its mobility and striking power make the carrier an important tool of military coercion against North Korea. It can also be stationed and integrated into the forward area for South Korea's air defense against North Korea's missile threat. In addition to ensure homeland defense, it would also demonstrate a commitment to regional security in line with hedging strategy, since Pyongyang's aggressive acts endanger regional security and stability.

88

Security
Strategies
Year: 13
Issue: 25

Moreover, giving possibility to alter the aircraft mix aboard the ship, aircraft carrier would provide flexibility to the ROKN. In combat oriented situations, reconnaissance and surveillance capability via manned aircraft or UAVs would come into prominence, while in humanitarian assistance or low intensity operations, helicopters and vertical lift aircrafts would be more needed. It should be remarked that drones, which are low cost, low risk, versatile, and powerful, assume an important role in military and civilian operations. Since the need to find somewhere to launch them from remains, it can be deployed across the world through an aircraft carrier, without requiring foreign airfields to operate.

Furthermore, refueling and rearming from a carrier close to the operating area eliminate the need for expensive tankers and gets more sorties more often from fewer aircrafts.⁵⁹

⁵⁹ "The Strategic Defence and Security Review and the National Security Strategy",

Blue-Water Navy Program
as a Part of South Korea's Hedging Strategy

A mobile sovereign airbase would give the South Korean government political and military choices, since positioning and remaining close to areas of interest for long duration missions improve the ability to coerce, deter, and intervene. An aircraft carrier would provide a wide range of option from diplomacy to high intensity warfare. The deployment of carriers with either aircraft or embarked troops gives a government the potential to act without serious risk of escalation, and later withdraw without penalty.⁶⁰ This is particularly important for dealing with North Korea as bilateral relations are quite delicate and can easily be deteriorated.

Besides, as an aircraft carrier can be used for bringing aid, offering relief and escape from disaster sites, and conducting evacuations from unsafe situations, it will indirectly contribute to South Korea's soft power which seems to have gained momentum in recent years. Seoul gives a special importance to project the image of a provider of global security through its contributions to international peace and security via foreign aid, development assistance, disaster relief operations and involvement in UN peacekeeping operations.⁶¹ Aircraft carriers can also supply electricity by its electrical generators and freshwater by water distilleries as a part of disaster relief and humanitarian operations. For example, *USS Carl Vinson* produced 200.000 gallons of freshwater a day after the 2010 Haiti earthquake.⁶²

Furthermore, it would not be wrong to say that the attempts of other regional actors to acquire aircraft carriers push South Korea to follow this trend, not to weaken its hand in territorial disputes with Japan and China.

Additionally, carriers allow keeping the sea lines of communication

UK House of Commons Defence Committee 2011, <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201012/cmselect/cmdfence/761/761vw07.htm> (Access date: 30.04.2016).

⁶⁰ "The Strategic Defence and Security Review and the National Security Strategy".

⁶¹ South Korea is currently a part of eight UN peacekeeping operations: UNMOGIP (India&Pakistan-1949), UNIFIL (Lebanon-1978), MINURSO (West Sahara-1991), UNMIL (Liberia-2003), UNOCI (Cote d'Ivoire-2004), MINUSTAH (Haiti-2004), UNAMID (Darfur-2007), and UNMISS (South Sudan-2011).

⁶² Tim Padgett, "The Haiti Earthquake", *Time*, January 18, 2010.

secure, thanks to their mobility and flexibility and reduce South Korea's overdependence on the US security umbrella. Thus, acquiring a carrier would help the ROK to ensure by its own means the security of the "shipping routes connecting the Strait of Hormuz, Malacca and Singapore straits and Southeast Asian waters which form the most important ocean routes used to import strategic commodities for South Korea."⁶³

Last, but not least, as a potent status of symbol, carrier's visit to different port of call and its participation to multinational task forces would bring a significant diplomatic weight to South Korea and boost its prestige in the international community.

Since aircraft carriers are multi functional and they do not necessarily serve offensive purposes, these naval assets are compatible with South Korea's hedging strategy based on cultivating a middle position between the US and China. Considering China's role for its commercial interests, the management of the North Korea question, and the security of the sea lines of communication, it is of prime importance for South Korea not to draw China's reaction because of its aircraft carrier program, while also "neutralizing its aggressive overtures without directly threatening the country."⁶⁴

With an aircraft carrier in service, the ROKN would play a greater role in US-led coalitions or regional initiatives aiming to restrain China. Diversifying South Korean government's political and military choice as a mobile sovereign airbase, it would maximize Seoul's bargaining position with Beijing. In the worst case scenario, if China becomes more aggressive after it rises, such an asset would improve South Korea's credibility to protect its interests.

Additionally, a carrier would help South Korea to gain

⁶³ Seo-Hang Lee, "SLOC Security in Northeast Asia: Korean Navy's Role." In Dalchoong Kim and Doug-Woon Cho (eds.), *Korean Sea Power and the Pacific Era*, Yonsei University Press, Seoul, 1990, p. 86.

⁶⁴ Antonio Fiori and Andrea Passeri, "Hedging in Search of a New Age of Non-Alignment", p. 11.

advantageous position in territorial disputes, deter North Korean threats, protect its national interests, and increase its credibility as an influential middle power in a distrustful regional neighborhood.

6. Conclusion

The competition between China and the US for regional influence leading to a power transition debate has created uncertainty about the future architecture of the Asia-Pacific. This uncertainty pushed regional middle powers to adopt hedging strategy to diversify strategic options and reduce potential risks, avoiding choosing one side at the expense of other. South Korea is one of the regional countries, which opted to hedge as it needs the US for security and China for economic interests. Considering the unpredictability of China's future strategic direction, as well as the mistrust about the intentions of other regional countries, Seoul has engaged in improving its military capabilities as a tool of indirect balancing, an integral part of hedging. Within this framework, the main attempt of South Korea was to speed up its efforts to fulfill its blue-water navy ambition, including the acquisition of an aircraft carrier, since the security architecture in East Asia is dominated by sea.

As hedging strategy leads to an insurance seeking behavior, blue-water navy program would help to strengthen South Korea's naval capabilities and reinforce military cooperation with the US and neighboring countries, as well as to constrain China and North Korea. Like other countries around China's periphery, South Korea is anxious about an eventual Chinese domination in the region. Nevertheless, as a result of its hedging strategy, Seoul avoids directly targeting China. Therefore, Seoul is more silent about the South China Sea question, compared to other related countries, which have weighed in against China. Opting for an indirect balancing, South Korea accelerates its efforts to improve its naval capabilities that will diversify Seoul's political and military options without threatening China, main trading partner of South Korea and key actor in dealing with North Korea. Besides, taking advantage of the US involvement in East and South China Seas disputes, Seoul can strengthen its hand by reinforcing its navy and consolidating its defense cooperation with the US. A multifunctional aircraft carrier would not only facilitate carrying out oceanic operations,

such as sea denial, sea control, and power projection, but also help South Korea to foster defense diplomacy with the US and neighboring countries.

It should be emphasized that South Korea is hedging heavily when security is concerned, as Seoul's standoff over Air Defense Identification Zone and its decision on the deployment of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense system demonstrate. Given that the PLA Navy is developing capabilities to control near seas, a more powerful ROKN would assist the US Navy more effectively in implementing A2/AD strategy against China. However, since one of the main aims of Seoul's hedging strategy is to tackle North Korean threat and separate China from North Korea, Seoul is drawn to Beijing for its impact on Pyongyang. This is why it is of the utmost importance for South Korea to avoid choosing a side between two powers and opt for a middle position.

A mobile sovereign airbase provided by an aircraft carrier would give the South Korean government a broad range of political and military choices, improving its ability to coerce, deter, and intervene. Consequently, while contributing South Korea's risk reduction efforts in its interaction with China, it would also reduce overdependence on the US for the protection of the sea lines of communication. A blue-water navy would thus be a considerable investment to pursue hedging strategy in the complex and uncertain security environment of the Asia-Pacific.

92

Security
Strategies

Year: 13

Issue: 25

Özet

Asya-Pasifik bölgesindeki güç dengesinin, son 30 yılda gösterdiği emsalsiz büyüme neticesinde gerek ekonomik, gerek siyasi, gerekse askerî anlamda etkinliğini artıran Çin lehine değişmeye başlaması ve ABD ile Çin arasında süregelen rekabet bölgenin geleceğine ilişkin soru işaretlerini beraberinde getirmektedir. Bu belirsizlik bölgedeki orta ölçekli devletleri, stratejik tercihlerini şekillendirmekte ve riskleri minimize etmek adına “*hedging*” stratejisi izlemeye sevk etmektedir. Dengeleme, çevreleme, bir gücün peşine takılma (*bandwagoning*), sorumluluk transferi (*buck-passing*) gibi dış politika seçeneklerinden farklı olarak, “*hedging*”, çeşitli stratejilerin bir arada kullanımını

öngörmektedir. Amaç, rekabet halindeki iki büyük güçten birini diğeri aleyhine seçmekten imtina edip her ikisiyle de çıkarlar çerçevesinde ilişki geliştirmektedir.

Güvenlik sebebiyle ABD ile, ekonomik çıkarlar sebebiyle Çin ile iyi ilişkiler yürütme gereksinimi duyan Güney Kore de “*hedging*” stratejisine başvuran bölge ülkelerindedir. Çin'in gelecekteki yönelimlerinin belirsizliğini ve diğeri bölge ülkelerinin öngörülemez amaçlarını göz önünde bulunduran Güney Kore, “*hedging*” kapsamında ekonomik ve ticari ilişkilerine zarar vermeden dolaylı dengelemeyi sağlamak adına askerî gücünü artırma yoluna gitmektedir. Zira Asya-Pasifik bölgesindeki karmaşık güvenlik ortamı bölge ülkelerini başta deniz gücü olmak üzere askerî kabiliyetlerini geliştirmeye itmektir. Bu durum Seul'u açık deniz donanması hedefini gerçekleştirme ve bir uçak gemisine sahip olma amaçlı çalışmalarına hız vermeye sevk etmiştir. Bölgedeki güvenlik ortamı denizlerin kontrolünde bağımsız düşünülmemeyeceğinden açık deniz donanması programı Güney Kore'nin “*hedging*” stratejisinin önemli bir parçası haline gelmektedir. Zira, ABD ile Çin arasındaki rekabetin deniz boyutu, Çin'in denizlerde artan varlığı, süregelen deniz yetki alanı ve ada tartışmaları ve Kuzey Kore unsuru, Güney Kore açısından deniz gücünün ehemmiyetini artırmaktadır.

İki güçlü aktör arasındaki rekabette orta yolcu bir yaklaşım olarak ifade edilebilecek “*hedging*” stratejisinin yürütülmesinde güçlü bir donanma; riskleri minimize etme, hareket serbestisi sağlama ve diğeri aktörlerin tercihlerini şekillendirme bağlamında ciddi bir artıdır. Hem doğrudan Çin'i hedef almadığından bu ülkenin tepkisini çekmemekte, hem ABD ve diğeri bölge ülkeleriyle askerî iş birliğinin geliştirilmesine olanak vermekte, hem de dolaylı dengeleme imkânı sağlamaktadır. Diğeri bölge ülkeleri gibi, Çin'in bölgede artan varlığından, bilhassa gelecekte bölgede hegemon güç olmasından endişe etmekle birlikte, Güney Kore, Çin'i karşısına almaktan kaçınmaktadır. Güney Çin Denizi meselesinde bölge ülkeleri Çin'e karşı tavır alırken Güney Kore'nin temkinli davrandığı görülmektedir. “*Hedging*” stratejisi çerçevesinde açıklanabilecek bu hareket tarzı, Seul'un bir numaralı ticaret ortağı ve Kuzey Kore meselesinin çözümünde temel aktör olan Çin'in tepkisini çekmeme amacını ortaya koymaktadır. Bunun yerine, “*hedging*”

kapsamında, Güney Kore, Çin'i dolaylı dengeleme yoluna gitmekte ve elindeki siyasi ve askerî seçenekleri artırma adına deniz gücünü geliştirmektedir. Zira bu sayede hem Güney ve Doğu Çin Denizi meselelerinde daha aktif bir rol oynamaya başlamış olan ABD ile askerî iş birliğini artırabilecek, hem bölge ülkeleriyle savunma diplomasisi kapsamında ilişkilerini geliştirebilecek, hem de Çin'in bölgedeki gücünü dengelemek adına uygulanacak girişimi engelleme ve bölgeye hapsetme stratejisine daha etkili destek verebilecektir.

Öte yandan zorlayıcılık, caydırıcılık ve müdahale yeteneğini artıracak olan açık deniz donanması, Güney Kore'nin deniz ticaret yollarının korunması gibi çıkarları hususunda ABD'ye olan aşırı bağımlılığını da azaltacaktır. Dolayısıyla, Asya Pasifik'teki mevcut güvensizlik ortamı ve belirsiz stratejik yönelimler göz önüne alındığında, daha gelişmiş ve güçlü bir deniz gücü Güney Kore'nin "hedging" stratejisini destekler mahiyettedir.

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