

Taking a Larger Role in International Affairs: Korea's Growing Efforts in Peacekeeping Missions and Development Aid

by Troy Stangarone (*ts@keia.org*)

In 1996, Korea joined the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), marking Korea's rise into the ranks of the developed world. Only twenty years ago this year, Korea began providing official development assistance (ODA). In the past few years, Korea has begun to play a larger role on the world stage, including taking part in international peace and reconstruction missions, while also increasing the level of ODA it provides. Korean forces are currently participating in six UN observer or assistance missions, and Korea is preparing to send 350 troops to participate in the UN mission in Lebanon (UNIFIL). In addition to taking part in peacekeeping and reconstruction operations abroad, Korea has laid out plans to bring its level of ODA up to UN recommended levels.

Korea and Afghanistan

As part of the U.S.-led mission in Afghanistan, Korea deployed 200 noncombatant medical workers and military engineers to Bagram in February 2003 to provide humanitarian aid to refugees and residents. Their mission included construction work, the installation of electrical equipment and machinery, and other civil projects. Earlier this year, the Korean government announced that it would withdraw all of its forces from Afghanistan at the end of 2007. Since the fall of the Taliban, Korea has provided \$80 million in grant aid and concessional loans. Korean citizens have gone to Afghanistan as aid and medical volunteers. There are about 100 Koreans in Kabul working for the Korean Embassy, NGOs under U.N. control, and charity organizations.

Tragically, on July 19, twenty-three Korean volunteers, recently arrived in Afghanistan, were kidnapped by the Taliban while traveling via bus through Ghazni province on the Kabul/Kandahar highway. Subsequently, the Taliban killed the leader of the Korean hostages, Bae Hyung Kyu, who was the pastor of a church in Seoul. A Taliban spokesman at the time said that he was executed because the Korean and Afghan governments had not negotiated with the Taliban in good faith for the release of the hostages. They killed another male hostage on July 30, citing failure of the Afghan government to meet their demands.

Since early in the crisis, the Korean government has asked that the government of Afghanistan give priority to securing the hostages' release. In an effort to secure their release, tribal elders from the region became involved in the negotiations. The Taliban are reportedly asking for twenty-three insurgents to be released in exchange for the hostages. However, those involved in the negotiations have reported that the Taliban have not been consistent in their demands. Korea sent presidential envoy Baek Jong-chun to help in gaining the release of the hostages.

As this article went to press, the Taliban had declared that there would be no further negotiations for the hostages' release and set a new deadline for the Afghan government to agree to their terms. In light of recent events, Korea is considering adding Afghanistan to the list of countries designated as "off-limits" under passport law. Currently, Iraq and Somalia are banned for Korean travelers. Under the proposed change, journalists and some others would be allowed to travel to Afghanistan in certain circumstances.

Iraq

Shortly after the U.S. invasion of Iraq, Korea dispatched 100 medics and 575 military engineers to the Iraqi town of Nassariya at the request of the United States government. In February 2004, after substantial debate, the National Assembly approved the dispatch of 3,000 troops to Iraq. This further deployment consisted of 1,400 Marines and Special Forces commandos, as well as an additional 1,600 military engineers and medics. In a speech to the National Press Club in Australia in 2004, then Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade Ban Ki-moon described the Korean contribution to Iraq as a "milestone in Korea's cause-oriented foreign policy" and that it "stems from our firm commitment to the values of democracy and freedom now embraced throughout the world ... (and reflects repayment) for the generous foreign assistance given during its time of need in the 1950s."

Korea's contribution has been the third largest contingent of forces in the U.S. coalition since early 2004. Though larger than the deployment by any U.S. ally other than the United Kingdom, it has gone largely unnoticed.

The Korean contingent, from the ROK's Zaytun Division, was given operational authority and responsibility for safety, stability, and civil/military operations in the northeastern province of Arbil. Since its mission began, the Zaytun Division's medics have treated over 50,000 patients, and construction forces have refurbished local facilities including orphanages, schools, and nursing homes. With support from Hyundai, they have also established a technology education center that has provided 1,100 Iraqis with training on auto repair and use of heavy equipment and computers.

As of April this year, Korea reduced its troop presence in Iraq to 1,200 and is considering ending its mission. Both the U.S. government and the government of Iraq have asked Korea to extend its mission. Korea is expected to make a decision in the next few months on whether to keep troops in Iraq. In terms of economic assistance, Korea provided an initial \$260 million and has pledged to provide an additional \$200 million, half of which will be in the form of soft loans provided by Korea's Economic Development and Cooperation Fund to help rebuild and develop Iraq's oil industry. The two countries have also reached agreements to strengthen economic ties in construction, energy, and information technology.

Official Development Assistance

According to the OECD, Korea's ODA rose to \$744 million in 2005 as Korea provided more assistance in bilateral grants and made larger contributions to the World Bank and regional development banks. Korea has announced that it will increase its ODA from 0.1 percent of Gross National Income (GNI) in 2009 to 0.25 percent in 2015 and that it is considering joining the OECD's Development Assistance Committee and meeting the United Nation's recommended level of 0.7 percent of GNI for ODA by 2030.