How South Korea Projects Power by Fighting Pirates

By Jonathan Berkshire Miller

South Korea is increasing its presence on the world stage with an assertive and effective role in combating piracy at sea in the Gulf of Aden and the Strait of Hormuz, two areas vital to Asian trade and energy supplies, writes Asia analyst Jonathan Berkshire Miller.

SOUTH KOREAN DEFENSE doctrine continues to be dominated by concerns about the unpredictably belligerent actions of North Korea. However, as Seoul’s role as a key international player grows, it has also adapted its view of international security to transcend the Korean Peninsula and take into account threats that affect not only national interests, but also the security and prosperity of its partners and allies.

One of the most salient examples of this is Seoul’s approach to international piracy. The vexing issue continues to have a large spillover effect on Asia’s export giants. Japan and China have both allocated significant maritime resources to combating pirates around the Horn of Africa and in Southeast Asia. However, despite the attention from the region’s two biggest economies, it is South Korea that has taken ownership of the problem in a more concrete and lasting way.

PIRATE THREATS AND ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITIES

Piracy surrounding the Horn of Africa continues to plague maritime commerce and threaten the global supply chain.

According to the International Maritime Bureau, there have been nearly 200 hijacking incidents off the coast of Somalia in the first three quarters of 2011. While the cost of piracy varies by nation and calculation, most agree that pirates operating around the Gulf of Aden siphon off more than $1 billion annually from the international economy. The costs are not merely ship and crew ransoms, but also from macroeconomic factors such as the degradation of the fishing industry, the loss of the region’s prestige as a reliable set of trade partners and even a drop in tourism.

Seoul has approached the problem with a twoproonged approach that is both tactical and strategic. This differs considerably from the policy and operations of other Asian countries with vested interests in the Horn of Africa, such as Japan and China, which tend to be more tactical and less strategic. Essentially, the policies of these countries are based more on imminent risk mitiga-
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South Korea is quickly moving to exceed Japan's established influence in the Middle East through its aggressive style of business diplomacy. The moves also send notice to China that its targeted approach to energy security in Africa has consequences, with established partners in the Middle East looking elsewhere.

A BROADER VIEW

However, protecting energy imports is not South Korea’s only motivation. Seoul is also enhancing its bilateral relationships in the Middle East and Africa, a fact that helps nudge along its policy of being more proactive in protecting its exports. Ties with the UAE specifically have become a top-tier priority as a result of Korean energy conglomerate Kepco being awarded a lucrative multibillion-dollar deal in 2009 to build four nuclear reactors for the Emirates by 2020. The contract, reported to be worth nearly $40 billion, was a key foreign policy coup for South Korea and another sign that it is able to forge new partnerships in regions where it previously had little diplomatic capital.

By increasing its maritime security cooperation with the UAE, South Korea is both ensuring the safety of its products and also fulfilling its obligations under the non-proliferation regime. Both South Korea and the UAE are members of the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI), an ad hoc global partnership of nations that aims to prevent the trafficking of weapons of mass destruction and related materials, as well as their delivery systems, to non-state actors and rogue regimes. The PSI is seen by South Korea as an essential ingredient in deterring a turbulent North Korea that uses bellicose actions to force concessions from Seoul and Washington over the stalled six-party talks regarding the nuclear weapons program.

While the PSI is not focused on piracy issues, it is well equipped to complement these efforts given the blurred line between anti-piracy missions and counterterrorism strategies in and around the Arabian Peninsula and East Africa. And, considering the financial times, Seoul is more than happy to have its maritime resources serve a range of strategic functions. In Somalia, pirate consortiums — traditionally condemned by local Islamist groups — have achieved a partial accommodation with the al-Qaeda-linked Al-Shabaab movement. Both sides have realized that there are mutual benefits to prolonged co-existence. This is extremely worrying, as a myriad of sensitive materials traverse the pirate-infested Gulf of Aden, including fissile material and technical components for peaceful nuclear programs.

SENSE AND SECURITY

The Korean Ministry of Defense’s 2010 White Paper reflects the current government’s realization that South Korea has major international interests. This not only encapsulates Seoul’s immediate sphere in Northeast Asia, but extends to a burgeoning client network that includes partners in the Middle East, Europe, Africa and the Americas. South Korean military doctrine needs this dynamism as it slowly transcends its decades-old Pyongyang-centric policy narrowly aimed at security on the Korean Peninsula.

Prioritizing anti-piracy operations and policies is an enlightened move by South Korea that should reap benefits in terms of both prosperity and security. It also sends a signal to resource-laden countries in the Middle East and beyond that South Korea is a viable partner that is willing to use force if necessary to protect its investments and economic relationships. These moves demonstrate the sophistication and ability to project power of the South Korean navy during a period of naval posturing by Asia’s emerging powers, principally China and India.

Seoul should continue down this path of reinforcing its bets and securing its brand.

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