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S. Korea unwilling to update U.S. plan

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SEOUL -- South Korea has announced that it will not work with the U.S. military to update a special-operations plan that would go into effect if North Korea suddenly collapsed, leaving a power vacuum in a communist nation with one of the world's largest military forces.

Code-named "OPLAN 5029-05," the plan contains "inappropriate contents, and many parts of the plan might become a serious restraint to sovereignty," according to a release Friday by South Korea's National Security Council.

The U.S. military was informed of the decision in January, it said.

U.S. officials declined comment.

"As a matter of policy, the United States does not discuss matters relating to operational plans," said David Oten, chief of public information for U.S. Forces Korea.

Several South Korean newspapers reported that under the plan, the U.S. military would be in control if an emergency erupted in North Korea resulting from a revolt or mass defections. Under the allies' current agreement, the U.S. Forces Korea commander, now Army Gen. Leon J. LaPorte, would assume control of all fighting forces, including South Korean.

The move adds to a growing atmosphere of discontent between the South Korean and U.S. militaries. Soon, the two allies will sign an agreement that sharply reduces South Korea's contribution to the stationing of U.S. forces in the next two years.

Seoul contributed about \$622 million in 2004 toward maintaining U.S. forces in Korea. The money paid for pre-positioned war reserve stocks, military construction and Korean civilian employee salaries for those who work on U.S. bases. South Korea has announced that it will cut \$60 million for 2005.

In a rift played out through alternating press conferences earlier this month, U.S. military officials said the \$60 million annual cut would affect the amount of combat equipment and impact readiness.

In an uncharacteristically strong rebuttal, 8th Army commander Lt. Gen. Charles C. Campbell said, "I want to state upfront that we will attempt to minimize the practical impact on readiness of these cost-avoidance and cost-cutting measures. However, we will be required to make tough but necessary decisions."

With the United States' drawing down its forces in South Korea, Seoul sought to reduce its contribution. South Korean Defense Minister Yoon Kwang-ung sharply replied a few days later that "if it becomes difficult to maintain U.S. troops in Korea because of a funding shortfall, the U.S. government can renegotiate the amount two years from now."

Also earlier this month, the United States made public a letter that terminated a program that stockpiled munitions for use in the event of a war. The War Reserve Stocks for Allies-Korea program could no longer accomplish its original purpose of improving South Korea's self-sufficiency with munitions, according to a May 2004 letter signed by then-Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz.

South Korea's economy is one of the strongest in the world, according to the U.S. military.

President Roh Moo-hyun has made it a priority for South Korea to take more responsibility for its own defense, while the United States -- mindful of its 50-plus-year military commitment since the end of the Korean War -- seeks to revamp what it considers an outdated, Cold War-minded defense of the South.

Washington is cutting its troops and moving them away from camps within mortar range of North Korea near the razor-sharp fencing of the demilitarized zone. About 5,000 troops were pulled out in 2004, with some dispatched directly to Iraq. An additional 3,000 will leave by the end of this year, leaving troop strength at a record low of 29,500, and 4,500 more will leave by 2008.

South Korea still realizes that it needs direct defense assistance from Washington, but must walk a fine line to balance those differences, said Rodger Baker, senior analyst and director of geopolitical analysis for Stratfor, an Austin, Texas-based think tank.

"South Korea seeks to establish itself as a more independent nation, one whose interests are diverging from those of the United States, but one that it is not ready to cut and run," Mr. Baker said.

Seoul also has expressed concern about U.S. statements that it would like a more "regional" role for its forces. If China engaged Taiwan, policy-makers are worried that South Korea could inadvertently be drawn into a conflict if U.S. forces were dispatched from here.

For several years, defense planners have pursued not just a regional role for all U.S. forces, but a global role, said Peter Brookes, former deputy assistant secretary of defense for Asian and Pacific affairs and senior fellow at the Heritage Foundation. The term "flexibility" is not a "code word" for Taiwan, he said, but it is an area where force might be used globally.

"Obviously, the Koreans are focused on the Korean Peninsula, but the United States has regional and global responsibilities," Mr. Brookes said.

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