

IMPACT PLAYERS

Hwang Joon-kook

By Andy Sau Ngai Lim and Marie DuMond

Who is he?

Hwang Joon-kook is the new ROK Ambassador for Defense Burden-sharing, Seoul's top delegate for the Special Measures Agreement (SMA) negotiations with the United States in April 2013. The SMA agreement establishes the rules of burden sharing cost for U.S. Forces Korea (USFK).

Ambassador Hwang is a career diplomat, serving most recently as the Deputy Chief of Mission and Minister for Political Affairs at the Embassy of the Republic of Korea in Washington, DC from February 2010 until his current appointment. Prior to that, he was the Ambassador for North Korean Nuclear Issues and Director General for North Korean Nuclear Affairs from 2008 to 2010. Hwang first joined the foreign service in 1982 and some of his other high-level assignments included serving as the Director of the Protocol Division (2000-2001), the Director of the UN Division in MOFAT (2001-2003), Political Counselor in charge of Security Council affairs at the UN (2003-2006), and Assistant to the Foreign Minister (2008). Ambassador Hwang received a Bachelor's of Art in Economics from Seoul National University in 1982 and a Master's in Public Affairs from Princeton University in 1986.

Why has he been in the news?

Ambassador Hwang participated in the first High-Level Meeting for the 9th Special Measures Agreement on Tuesday, July 2 in Washington, DC in order to negotiate a new agreement as the 8th SMA is set to expire December 31, 2013. The first round was more of an exploratory meeting where both sides were able to test the waters. The next round of talks is expected in late July, with a shared goal from both sides to reach an agreement by the end of October 2013.

What can we expect from him?

Ambassador Hwang must contend with American pressures for additional increases in ROK burden sharing in the negotiations for the 9th SMA. The 8th SMA, negotiated in 2008, increased the ROK's contributions to 40-45% of total USFK costs by 2012 in addition to yearly adjustments for inflation.

At the same time, Ambassador Hwang is balancing significant domestic pressures. Domestic ROK military procurements like the ongoing bidding process for 60 jet fighters and 4 Global Hawk spy drones are underway. These costly projects are a part of Defense Reform 2020 which seeks to modernize ROK military equipment and increase military personnel capability as well as Defense Reformation Plan 307, which seeks to enhance cooperation within the ROK Army. Additionally, new defense reform bills have been delayed in the National Assembly since April 2012 due to domestic politics, complicating the ROK's ability to contribute to USFK costs. The Park administration and Ambassador Hwang are also dealing with ongoing Korean public pressure to renegotiate the USFK Status of Forces Agreement and to justify to the public a 3.8% increase in the domestic defense budget in the face of a weakening Korean economy.

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