

Early Birds in Korea

"Exporting" Defense AT&L
Has Far-Reaching Impact

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"The early bird catches the worm." Who doesn't know this proverb? A study club in the Republic of Korea (ROK) defense acquisition agency was born and has grown with this phrase as the key tenet of its effort to improve defense acquisition professionalism by studying the *Defense AT&L* magazine published for the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) by the Defense Acquisition University (DAU). The study club's name originated from that tenet as the "Early Birds Study"—or the EBS, for short. This year, the EBS will celebrate the 10th anniversary of its foundation and is almost as old as the South Korean Government organization of which it is part.

Background and Context

The South Korean Government—from the National Assembly to the Ministry of National Defense (MND), and the Defense Acquisition Program Administration (DAPA), which is the equivalent of the DoD's Office of Acquisition, Technology, and Logistics (AT&L)—has been working toward a more responsive, efficient and transparent acquisition system that meets evolving defense needs while developing a more professional acquisition workforce. Well, that sure sounds easy, we all might say, but it is a daunting challenge to assess and find effective ways to make the fundamental changes needed while staying true to a strong bureaucratic culture that has a long track record and some amazing successes. In an increasingly global acquisition environment, Korean officials recognize that

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Publications of the Early Birds Study group draw information and inspiration from Defense AT&L magazine.
Collage of Early Birds Study Group photos.

change is necessary to survive and prosper. The lessons are certainly clear to the young intellectual professionals who will form the government of the future. This article shines a brief spotlight on just such a group.

DAPA

To talk about the EBS, it is first necessary to understand the Korean Defense Acquisition Program Administration (DAPA). The DAPA was launched on Jan. 1, 2006, and consolidated all acquisition functions scattered across the MND, military Services and defense agencies. Its primary missions are acquiring weapon systems for Korea's military forces and strengthening the Korean defense industry. Many military officers previously in charge of acquisition programs were transferred to the DAPA with the newly designated specialty of "acquisition," and yet many were new to the concept of defense acquisition.

Joint Military Affairs Group

Another key organization that should be introduced is the Joint U.S. Military Affairs Group-Korea (JUSMAG-K). JUSMAG-K is a security cooperation organization working in Korea to support the alliance by advancing U.S.-ROK

mutual security interests. JUSMAG-K closely works with the MND, military Services and the DAPA, particularly on foreign military sales (FMS) and defense cooperation in armaments programs. JUSMAG-K has maintained liaison offices since the MND's establishment.

The Beginning of the EBS

With establishment of the DAPA, the chief of JUSMAG-K reassigned Hwa Yu, who had worked at the MND Liaison Office for the several years, to the DAPA Liaison Office as the DAPA Liaison. She had just completed a master's course in Defense Project Management at the Korean National Defense University. Yu was new to the job and felt the need to gain acquisition knowledge on both ROK and DoD defense acquisition and to develop professional relationships with DAPA personnel.

Yu met then-Maj. Taijun Park, whom she had known during cooperation on the U.S.-Korea Multiple Launch Rocket System (MLRS) project and who was now assigned to the DAPA. They talked about regularly practicing English and studying defense acquisition and agreed to form a club to study DoD acquisition in English. In the first week of April

2006, Yu, Park, Maj. Hansoo Park and Lt. Col. Hyeok Seo gathered at the conference room of the JUSMAG-K liaison office for the first time at 7 a.m. The DAPA compound was still quiet before the official government workday began at 9 a.m. Because they recognized they had developed strong

perspectives. Invited guests include acquisition leaders, such as a former Minister of Defense for Acquisition who offered strategic thinking and a vision of the way forward in defense acquisition. The group also has hosted a legal advisor from a well-known law firm with extensive career knowledge and

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momentum, the group registered in the DAPA as a “Community of Practice (CoP)” on May 3, 2006. Park first came up with “Early Birds” for the study club name and Yu proposed EBS, an abbreviated version of the Early Birds Study, which became the official study club name.

The club established two main objectives: (1) study the *Defense AT&L* magazine published in English to learn advanced defense acquisition systems, compare these with the ROK systems and find ways to improve; (2) and share what the club members study with the rest of the DAPA personnel. Those two objectives were reflected in the EBS charter and have remained intact since.

Activities

Regular Meeting: Based on the two objectives, the EBS members meet twice weekly to study defense acquisition. The members take turns leading the weekly study sessions in an agreed sequence. The lead member must choose a topic, primarily from the *Defense AT&L* magazine, translate it into Korean and develop a study plan. Government Accountability Office (GAO) reports, *Defense Acquisition Research Journal* papers, and other important reports such as Defense Acquisition Performance Assessment reports also have been selected for discussion.

Friday Social Meetings: These primarily are lunch gatherings to strengthen the personal relationships within the group. While regular meetings are required, the Friday lunch is optional.

Seminars: To achieve the knowledge-sharing goal of the EBS, the club holds quarterly seminars within DAPA and outside DAPA with interested acquisition personnel.

Sessions With Experts: The EBS Club often invites defense acquisition experts to regular sessions, seminars or social meetings so that the members can gain in-depth knowledge and share insights from subject-matter experts and broader

experience in defense contracting as well as a cost analyst and a 3-D printing company chief executive officer.

Annual Publication of Study Materials: Each year, the EBS assembles the Korean translations of articles they had studied for the past year. Currently, the members are reviewing the translated articles for the 10th volume of their study results. But the study results book provides more than translations. Some topics of interest for DAPA, like Acquisition Strategy, that were studied more in depth resulted in the group proposing certain changes. Additionally, the DoD decision-making and contracting systems and other useful information have been added to the books as appendices, in order to help DAPA readers better understand the DoD systems. The EBS books are used as sources of information on DoD acquisition policies and systems and trends and to provide ideas for improvement to DAPA officials. The selected topics usually are of DAPA interest, and the EBS books provide easy access in the Korean language to current and timely information that otherwise would be difficult to acquire.

Membership

The EBS members include both military and civilian officials assigned to the DAPA. English language ability is a requirement of those who join the EBS. Every member is expected to actively participate in the study session. There is a 2-week probationary period in order to provide an opportunity to see if a prospective member can meet EBS’ expectations.

The 17 current members have a variety of working backgrounds and include active-duty military (five Army, four Navy, and two Air Force members), five government civilian employees (including a senior executive official) and a U.S. Embassy employee.

Achievements

Exposing DAPA personnel to the latest DoD acquisition policies and practices through books, Internet postings, seminars, etc., has been well received by many DAPA officials



An Early Birds Study session in April 2014.

Early Birds Study Group Photo.

for providing “food for professional thought.” A few tangible contributions follow:

Since December 2014, the EBS has held three seminars in the DAPA with the themes that are of great interest to DAPA employees—such as professionalism, acquisition ethics and leadership. EBS introduced DoD policies and practices from sources such as the Better Buying Power initiatives (based on a BBP 3.0 White Paper by Under Secretary of Defense for AT&L Frank Kendall); “Ethics and Acquisition Professionalism: It’s All about Trust,” an article by Kendall in the September–October 2014 *Defense AT&L*; and “The 21st-Century Acquisition Leader,” an article by Paul E. Turner in the January–February 2015 *Defense AT&L*.

Comparisons with DAPA systems were followed by extensive discussions at each seminar. The club also has held several joint seminars with the ROK Army HQs and the Defense Agency for Quality and Technology to introduce DoD and ROK acquisition systems to the requirement and technology planning communities and to hear their opinions. These seminars have helped the participants to better understand both their own and U.S. acquisition systems. A large portion of the ROK’s offshore procurement comes from the United States. The EBS club members aspire to expand their reach to the other military Services and the Joint Chiefs of Staff to invigorate communications within the requirements community.

Prior to the 2013 and 2014 U.S.-ROK Defense Technological and Industrial Cooperation Committee (DTICC) meetings co-chaired by the U.S. Under Secretary of Defense (AT&L) and the Korean Minister of Defense Acquisition, the club members prepared the Korean delegation on topics and presented ideas

for discussion points. One of the topics related to the DoD’s Better Buying Power initiatives. The club also held a seminar on the BBP initiatives, sharing the latest DoD trends that the ROK is trying to emulate, and discussed the direction in which the DAPA should evolve.

The EBS has made significant contributions to formulating defense technology security and export control policies. As the club members studied trends in defense acquisition, they noted the importance and impact of technology protection and subsequently studied U.S. technology security and export control systems and shared the knowledge through seminars and lectures at the DAPA training center. After Yu took the DAU’s PMT 203 course on International Security and Technology Transfer/Control in November 2011, the club put together detailed information on defense technology security and export control supporting the establishment of a defense technology security office. That effort is about to bear more fruit in the form of a proposed defense technology security law, which is currently under review in the ROK National Assembly.

The best achievement, perhaps, is the professional growth of the members of the EBS. The members evolve from acquisition professionals to acquisition leaders themselves. EBS President Col. Hyeok Seo of the ROK Army led the nascent EBS club as a freshly promoted lieutenant colonel and now is in charge of Korea’s important tank projects. Acting as a servant leader to the group members (see above-mentioned “21st Century Acquisition Leader” Turner article in *Defense AT&L*), he has endeavored to extend the EBS members’ potential to become global acquisition leaders. Recently, he participated in the International Defense Educational and Acquisition Arrangement (IDEAA) seminar in the United Kingdom, where he briefed the international audience of acquisition and educational experts

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on Korean approaches to acquisition challenges and the need for training and education. It was the realization of one of the dreams of the EBS. The U.S. delegation was led by Katharina McFarland, Assistant Secretary of Defense for Acquisition, and James Woolsey, President of DAU.

Seo currently is working on the HR development of the DAPA by actively proposing training and career development models and improvement measures for the Korean acquisition professionals. Lt. Col. Hansoo Park is back in the EBS after his return from a 3-year overseas assignment for which he was personally selected as the Army Program Officer at the Korean Embassy in Washington D.C. He says the knowledge and understanding of the DoD acquisition system he had gained through the EBS was, without question, extremely helpful to the performance of his duty in the United States. Now as the “early bird continues to fly,” he is sharing his experience and insight from the United States with junior members of the EBS.

Awards

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almost every year, ranking second just a few times. Lately, the EBS also was recognized in the Top 10 at the national government level CoP competition, in which about 100 CoPs competed. It was the first time any DAPA CoP received national government recognition.

Conclusion

The Early Birds Study group is a powerful example of successful international outreach and collaboration. It is unique in being completely driven from within—by a group of young Korean professionals who are making waves. The U.S. co-author of this article has worked for years in seeking improved and/or strengthened international collaboration and rarely has encountered such an energetic, highly effective group of acquisition professionals. The growing professionalism in the DAPA workforce will pay acquisition outcome benefits between our two nations in current and future programs. Just remember—it's the early bird that catches the worm!!

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Members of the current Early Birds Study group hold copies of *Defense AT&L* magazine—a resource for their work. Front Row, from left to right: Hwa Yu; Lt. Col. Hansoo Park; Col. Hyeok Seo (president); Cmdr. Yisub Ahn; and Hyoungcheol Kim. Back Row, left to right: Lt. Jeongha Kim; Maj. Sangho Aum; Maj. Joseph Kim; Sangeun Lee; Yunhee Do; Lt. Cmdr. Sehoon Cha; Seok Kim.

Photo by Korean Defense Acquisition Program Administration Photographer Jaehoon Kim.