

USFK REALIGNMENT AND REDUCTION

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I. INTRODUCTION

The United States and the Republic of Korea (ROK) continued in 2006 to institute the most far-reaching changes in the structure of their military alliance since the withdrawal of the U.S. 7th Division from Korea and the establishment of the U.S.-ROK Combined Forces Command (CFC) three decades earlier.

A major realignment of U.S. bases in Korea was progressing slowly but surely. Most U.S. Forces Korea (USFK) military personnel were to be shifted from the existing 43 U.S. bases spread throughout the country to two “hub” areas south of Seoul. U.S. forces were being removed from the Demilitarized Zone, and many missions they had performed were being transferred to the ROK. USFK headquarters was to be moved soon from downtown Seoul, southward to the city of Byeongtaek. The two governments were also cooperating to implement a reduction in the number of U.S. troops in Korea from 37,000 in 2004 to 25,000 by the end of 2008.

Overall, the U.S. and ROK governments were cooperating well in agreeing on and implementing the sweeping changes in their alliance relationship. One U.S. official offered the optimistic observation that the most difficult phase—decision-making—had already passed and that the focus now was primarily on implementation. The cooperation occurred despite the fact that the two governments’ motivations for supporting the changes differed in many respects. Some observers remarked that, ironically, the U.S. was receiving more cooperation from the progressive South Korean government for the changes than it might have received if the ROK had been led by a conservative president.

Among other things, the United States wished to reduce the number of U.S. forces stationed on the Korean Peninsula to free them for more pressing duties elsewhere, particularly in Iraq. Similarly, U.S. insistence on the need for its remaining troops in Korea to enjoy “strategic flexibility,” i.e. to be able to conduct operations off the peninsula, reflected a new U.S. military doctrine responding to the changed security environment after the end of the Cold War and the terrorist attacks of 9/11.

The administration of progressive South Korean President Roh Moo-hyun regarded the reduction and realignment of U.S. forces as consistent with his call, as a presidential candidate in 2002, for a more equal relationship between the two allies and for greater self-confidence on the part of South Koreans in their own military capabilities. He also hoped that the lower USFK profile would reduce tensions on the peninsula and facilitate North-South Korean military talks. The changes also meshed with his call for ROK assumption of wartime operational control (OPCON) over its own forces, to which the U.S. and the ROK agreed in late 2006.

II. U.S. AND ROK MOTIVATIONS

U.S. and South Korean interests and perceptions in Northeast Asia were in flux, and sometimes diverging. The enemy’s face was changing—at least for many South Koreans. At the initiative of President Kim Dae-jung (1998-2003) and current President Roh Moo-hyun, the South’s “sunshine” approach to engaging North Korea had resulted in a lessened threat perception of North Korea on the part of many South Koreans. The progressive governments of Kim and Roh were determined to promote reconciliation with North Korea.

From being firmly aligned with the U.S. against the North, the ROK under Presidents Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun sometimes sought to play the role of intermediary between the U.S. and North Korea. Both Kim and Roh absolutely rejected the possibility of military action against the North Korean nuclear program, even though President George W. Bush continued to say publicly that he would take “no options off the table.”

South Koreans were also wary of the expansion of USFK’s mission to permit “strategic flexibility.” They did not want to be drawn against their wishes or interests into a regional conflict off the peninsula, for example, U.S. intervention in hostilities between the PRC and Taiwan. Negotiations between the U.S. and ROK foreign ministers in January 2006 finally resulted in a joint statement in

which the ROK said it respected “the necessity for strategic flexibility of the U.S. forces in the ROK.” For its part, the U.S. pledged to respect “the ROK position that it shall not be involved in a regional conflict in Northeast Asia against the will of the Korean people.” A mechanism for balancing South Korean sovereignty—which could limit the United States’ freedom to move USFK units from South Korean soil—with the United States’ potential need to redeploy USFK troops under U.S. command, remained to be developed in future negotiations.

President Roh wanted the ROK to play a larger, more autonomous role in its own defense while remaining firmly allied with the U.S. He called his approach “cooperative self-reliant national defense.” The term hearkened back to the “self-reliant defense” policy espoused by President Park Chung Hee in the early 1970s after the Nixon doctrine of 1969 resulted in the withdrawal of the U.S. 7th Division from Korea. Roh’s insertion of the word “cooperative” was intended to counter conservative critics who thought that he regarded the alliance too lightly.

Roh had entered office with the earnest desire to render the alliance more equal and balanced, a sentiment backed by increasingly nationalistic South Koreans. Toward that end, President Roh promoted ROK defense reform and said that he intended to regain wartime OPCON over ROK troops. During the USFK realignment and reduction, the ROK expected to assume some of USFK’s missions and responsibilities while seeking to maintain the same level of deterrence against North Korea.

For its part, the U.S. needed to adjust its global military posture following the September 11 terrorist attacks and the invasion and occupation of Iraq, providing the main catalyst for the USFK changes. In fact, the 3,600 troops withdrawn from USFK in 2004—a brigade from the 2nd Infantry Division—were immediately reassigned to Iraq. Most ROK officials understood the situation and therefore felt that the U.S. would proceed to implement most of its proposed changes in Korea out of necessity, whether the ROK was supportive or not.

A U.S. Defense Department official identified the new U.S. global priorities as “mobility, increased capability of U.S. forward forces, combined and joint operations, forward infrastructure to support long-range attack capabilities, and promotion of greater allied contributions.” The U.S. Global Defense Posture Review determined that USFK should be realigned into more flexible, modular units.

Aside from such structural reform, the U.S. “revolution in military affairs” called for a linking of intelligence, advanced communication technology, and precision-guided munitions to win wars. Military analysts suggested that even conventional wars no longer required large-scale ground forces. U.S. policymakers therefore

believed that a reduction of U.S. forces in Korea would not weaken overall deterrence of North Korea, especially since the ROK military’s conventional capabilities continued to grow while the North’s stagnated due to a collapsed economy.

III. BENEFITS OF REALIGNMENT

In addition to the strategic reasons for the realignment, both the U.S. and the ROK stood to benefit in immediate, practical ways. The United States would save on operational costs—for communications, transportation, and security—by closing its many small bases scattered between Seoul and the DMZ and consolidating most of its forces in two hubs. It would also benefit by the construction of state-of-the-art facilities at the new hubs, especially since many of USFK’s existing bases had been built in the 1950s. Relocating the 2nd Infantry Division to the two hubs would result in improved troop mobility based on the latest technology and warfare doctrine. The reduced U.S. military visibility in Seoul and other urban areas would reduce tensions with local communities.

If a war occurred on the peninsula, the redeployment of USFK forces south of Seoul would increase their survivability by placing them out of range of North Korea’s initial artillery strikes. (On the other hand, it risked increasing their susceptibility to a mass casualty strike.) U.S. forces would thus possess a greater ability to respond to a North Korean attack. The realignment de-emphasized the role of U.S. ground forces and played to U.S. strengths and expected contributions in a conflict: C4I (command, control, communications, computers, and intelligence) and air power.

When it was first broached, some Koreans feared that the U.S. redeployment south of Seoul would allow the U.S. to preemptively attack North Korea’s nuclear facilities without worrying about retaliatory artillery attacks on U.S. troops. Such fears appeared largely to have faded as time passed. Among other things, it became apparent that the redeployment would not take place for years. Moreover, with the U.S. military preoccupied in Iraq, most observers believed that U.S. consideration of the use of force against North Korea was unlikely for the foreseeable future.

For South Korea, the USFK areas to be returned, especially in cities such as Seoul or Busan, were a tremendous asset for economic development and public projects. The USFK golf course in central Seoul, returned to ROK use in the 1990s, had become the site of a family park and the national art museum.

The return of USFK bases would also alleviate friction with land owners. Privately owned land accounted for almost 25% of the land granted by the ROK for USFK's use, but, unlike Japan, the Korean government had not paid rent to the owners. With democratization, owners' anger over the situation and their demands for the return of their properties had increased. Several farmers had successfully sued the government.

Finally, the return of U.S. bases would reduce the risk to civilians from military-related accidents. Many U.S. bases were in heavily populated areas. In other cases, some people had continued to farm their land even though it had been granted by the ROK government for USFK use. The problem occurred typically when USFK was not actively using the property but had designated it as part of a safety zone, for example, for the storage and handling of nearby explosive ordnance. Such civilian "encroachment" of USFK bases and its attendant risk to civilians had become an increasingly serious problem in recent years.

IV. NEGOTIATING FORA

South Korea and the United States negotiated their military alliance arrangements at a range of meetings at different levels. The annual Security Consultative Meeting (SCM), attended by the defense ministers of the two countries, was the most senior regular forum governing the alliance. The 2006 SCM included discussion of the Joint Study on the Vision of the ROK-U.S. Alliance, which began the process of identifying updated shared goals for the alliance as the ROK pursued reconciliation with North Korea.



U.S. and ROK officials Cooperate on USFK Realignment.

During the 2002 SCM, the defense chiefs had established a "Future of the Alliance" (FOTA) forum for their staff to discuss ways of adapting the alliance to the new global security environment. Negotiators chose to focus first on concrete, near-term issues, such as relocating USFK bases and the transfer of missions from the U.S. to the ROK. The FOTA meetings in 2003 and 2004 also discussed the ROK military capability enhancements necessary to allow the U.S. 2nd Infantry Division to move from the DMZ to bases south of Seoul. After ten FOTA sessions yielded agreements on USFK base relocation, officials renamed the forum the "Strategic Policy Initiative" (SPI) to better reflect its new focus on developing long-term, strategic goals for a future-oriented alliance, such as changing the combined command structure and identifying new security objectives. SPI talks were scheduled to continue into 2007.

V. PLANS

ROK-U.S. talks produced the Land Partnership Plan (LPP) in 2001, which was renegotiated until 2004, and the Yongsan Relocation Plan in 2004. Under the LPP, agreement was reached to consolidate U.S. bases in Korean into two hubs: a Central Region hub at the cities of Osan and Byeongtaek for command and combat units and a Southern Region hub at Daegu, Busan, and Bohang for support units. Military planners chose the new hub areas for their proximity to airports and seaports, which allowed for easier reception and staging of augmenting U.S. forces in case of conflict or other contingency.

In Phase I of the relocation under LPP, all of the 2nd Infantry Division's (2ID) small bases north of Seoul were to be consolidated in the Uijeongbu and Dongducheon areas by 2006. As of the end of the year, it appeared that completion of the phase would not occur until mid-2007. Because of the delay, some 2ID bases might be consolidated to the hubs in one movement. In Phase II, pending preparation of the new hub bases, the consolidated 2ID units stationed near the DMZ would move to the Central Region hub. A small number of U.S. troops would continue to cycle through a Joint Training Facility near the DMZ to prevent North Korea from perceiving a diminished U.S. will to deter attack.

Under the related Yongsan Relocation Plan (YRP), USFK headquarters, United Nations Command, Combined Forces Command, and 8th Army headquarters were to be moved to Byeongtaek by 2008. The likely dismantlement of the Combined Forces Command with the transfer of wartime operational control would require adjustments to the YRP. The ROK had initially requested relocation of Yongsan in 1990, but U.S.-ROK talks at the time were suspended only a year later due to the first North Korean nuclear crisis and to the high estimated cost of the move.

With full implementation of the LPP and YRP plans, the 43 U.S. bases in Korea would be reduced to 17, and the 60,000 acres entrusted to USFK use would drop to 20,000. As the U.S. prepared bases for closure, the U.S. and the ROK sometimes disagreed about the required degree of environmental remediation or clean-up, causing delays in the official return of some bases. Fifteen bases were returned to the ROK in July 2006; fourteen more failed to pass ROK environmental inspections, leaving them empty of American troops but not yet officially returned. Meanwhile, as of November 2006, the ROK government had secured one third of the land needed in Byeongtaek for 2ID's move to the new hub there.

The U.S. and the ROK were in agreement in principle that the party requesting a USFK move would also pay the cost of the relocation. Hence the U.S. was to pay for most of 2ID's move south, while the ROK would cover the expenses for moving the USFK headquarters units from Yongsan. Since the ROK would assume control of the vacated bases, it was also paying for the land acquisitions necessary to create the new hubs.

Although the initial costs for the ROK were much higher than for the U.S., due to the ROK's need to purchase land for the new hubs, the expected returns to the ROK once the vacated land was developed would be even higher. The exact cost of the base relocations would only be known upon completion of the master plan, expected at the end of January 2007, but it was likely to exceed \$10 billion. The joint master plan would propose a timetable, facility construction blueprint, and cost-sharing agreement.

The South Korean public expressed concern that the costs resulting from the USFK changes and the related upgrading of ROK forces were too great and that deterrence of North Korea might be reduced. These sentiments translated into political pressures that could slow implementation of the LPP and YRP. Identifying with South Korean public concerns about a major shift in security posture during the ongoing second North Korean nuclear crisis, ROK negotiators deliberately sought delayed target dates for the redeployments and realignments. Acting upon instructions from the South Korean National Security Council, South Korea's chief negotiator lobbied, albeit unsuccessfully, for the second phase of the 2ID relocation to be postponed until after resolution of the nuclear crisis.

Meanwhile, a very active minority of farmers and civic groups refused to vacate the government-desired land in Byeongtaek—preventing land purchases and stalling construction of the new hub there. In December 2006, the ROK Ministry of National Defense (MND) predicted the Yongsan and 2ID moves would occur in 2013 due to these delays and cost-sharing disagreements. The ROK MND also faced a learning curve in planning and building a billion-dollar base for the first time. U.S. government officials recognized the inevitability of some delay but publicly stuck to the more ambitious, established deadline of 2008—while privately admitting 2009 would be likelier.

VI. HISTORY OF USFK TROOP REDUCTIONS

U.S. ground forces represented a concrete symbol of the U.S. commitment to defend South Korea, a promise legally binding through the Mutual Defense Treaty. Since the Korean War ended, however, there was rarely a period in which the U.S. was not reducing its forces stationed in Korea or considering a further reduction, based primarily on the ROK's increasing defense capabilities.

Following U.S. détente with China, the Nixon doctrine of 1969 called on U.S. allies to take greater responsibility for their own defense. In the early 1970s, the U.S. began to withdraw the 7th Infantry Division from South Korea, taking the U.S. troop level from 61,000 to 43,000. The resulting fear that the U.S. would unilaterally reduce its commitment to the ROK, coupled with strongman President Park Chung Hee's desire to strengthen South Korea's autonomy, resulted in increased South Korean defense spending.

President Jimmy Carter authorized the withdrawal of the remaining U.S. infantry division in Korea in 1977, but strong opposition within both the ROK and the U.S. resulted in the plan's suspension after only the first phase of the reduction, involving 3,600 troops, had been implemented.

After the end of the Cold War, the East Asia Strategy Initiative launched by President George H.W. Bush's administration in 1990 determined that it would be feasible to reduce USFK over a ten-year period. The U.S. withdrew 7,000 troops in Phase I of the planned reduction, but cancelled Phase II in 1991 due to concerns over North Korea's nuclear program. Thereafter, the USFK troop level remained at 36,000-37,000 personnel.

In 2004, the U.S. announced its intention to withdraw 12,500 more troops from Korea by 2005. Due to ROK opposition, U.S. and ROK negotiators agreed on a delayed deadline of 2008 for the withdrawal. The starting troop level of 37,000 in 2004 was reduced to around 29,000 by the end of 2006 and ultimately was to be further reduced to 25,000 by the end of 2008.

The ROK military was to assume increasing responsibility for the ground force missions previously performed by 2ID. The first ten missions to be transferred to the ROK included safeguarding the Joint Security Area (commonly known as Panmunjom), counter-fire, rear area de-contamination, counter-special operations force operations, managing the Maehyang-ri firing range, search and rescue, close air support, emergency mine spreading, military police rotation and control, and weather forecasting. As of the end of 2006, eight of the ten missions had already been shifted to the ROK.

During negotiations on 2ID's reduction and realignment, the U.S. promised to invest \$11 billion to enhance combined U.S.-ROK defense capabilities in 150 areas. A similar military aid package of \$1.6 billion accompanied the 1971 reduction in U.S. troop levels in Korea; it was used to support the ROK military's five-year modernization program.

U.S. force reductions usually prod the ROK to increase its own defense budget. Nixon's withdrawal, for example, triggered a ten-fold increase in ROK military spending over 15 years. Concurrent with the current U.S. drawdown, the ROK planned to increase its defense budget significantly to support a 15-year military modernization program called "Defense Reform 2020."

VII. PROSPECTS

The scale, cost, and complexity of the USFK realignment outlined in the Land Partnership Plan and the Yongsan Relocation Plan were unmatched in the history of the U.S.-ROK alliance. Practical implementation issues alone would make it difficult to keep on schedule. In addition, Korean conservatives continued to oppose the realignment, and they hoped that a new ROK president in February 2008 or a new U.S. president in January 2009 might reverse course. At the end of 2006, however, that appeared unlikely. The South Korean public seemed increasingly accustomed to the plan, and no South Korean presidential candidate was focusing on the realignment. In the United States, most Defense Department professionals supported the plan.

The main challenge to the alliance remained differences of perception about the challenges posed by North Korea. Without consensus on North Korea, the alliance lost some of its coherence and vitality. In the absence of a fundamental resolution of the North Korean problem, the U.S. and the ROK needed to intensify their leadership discussions about North Korea in an effort to achieve consensus. Some observers believed that the differences between the Bush and Roh administrations over North Korea were too great and their remaining time in office too short to achieve such a consensus. Thus, there was considerable hope that the advent of new administrations in both countries in the coming two years would offer a fresh opportunity for the two allies to find common ground. Regardless of the changes in administration, transitioning the alliance towards a potential post-unification role—while still maintaining the capability to deter a North Korean attack—presented a unique challenge for U.S. and ROK leaders.

Prospects over the longer term were hard to predict. The democratization of South Korea allowed the expression of a diversity of opinions about South Korea's relations with North Korea and the United States. A vocal minority favored a complete withdrawal of U.S. troops and an end to the alliance, but most South Koreans continued to believe that alliance with the U.S. was in ROK interests. A minority of U.S. military analysts also advised the complete withdrawal of U.S. forces from Korea, arguing that the cost to the U.S. of the alliance outweighed the benefits, but most U.S. policymakers disagreed.

In both the U.S. and South Korea there was widespread agreement that the alliance should be more "equal," but by that Americans meant that the ROK should play a larger role in its own defense and provide more in-kind and financial support for the remaining U.S. forces in Korea. Koreans, on the other hand, simply meant that they wanted the U.S. to be more accommodating of their positions on alliance arrangements such as the SOFA. Each country's leaders clearly needed a better understanding of and sensitivity to the interests and perspectives of the other.

South Korea had long sought reconciliation with North Korea, but North Korea had not yet reduced its troop levels or dropped its offensive military posture against the South. While combined U.S.-ROK conventional forces were clearly superior to those of the North with its collapsed economy, North Korea's further development of nuclear weapons in 2006 meant that its "asymmetric" threat potential had increased. Thus, the ROK would continue to need to rely on the U.S. alliance and its nuclear umbrella for the foreseeable future.

During the Cold War, the U.S. strategic goal of containing communism coincided with the ROK's need to deter North Korea. With the end of the Cold War, and particularly after the September 11 terrorist attacks, U.S. and ROK core objectives diverged. Articulating how the realigned military alliance would allow each to accomplish its new priority objectives—such as countering terrorism and engaging North Korea—would inject new purpose into modernizing the alliance. Security cooperation required more creativity and vision when the enemy no longer had a clear and hardened face.