

WARTIME OPERATIONAL CONTROL

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I. INTRODUCTION

The United States and the Republic of Korea in 2006 set a timeframe for the transfer of wartime operational control (OPCON) of South Korean military forces from the U.S. to the ROK. At the Security Consultative Meeting (SCM) on October 20-21, the U.S. and ROK defense ministers agreed that the transfer would occur sometime between October 15, 2009, and March 15, 2012. As of year's end, the United States continued to seek a 2009 transfer while the ROK preferred 2012. Some conservative South Koreans expressed deep concern that the transfer would weaken South Korea's defense its alliance with the U.S., but leaders of both the U.S. and South Korea agreed that the change would benefit the alliance and they expressed their determination to proceed with the move.

II. HISTORY OF OPCON IN THE ROK

The history in South Korea of operational control, a delegated subset of command over military forces to achieve a particular mission, can be broken down into three periods: 1950-1978, 1978-1994, and 1994-present.

During the first period, OPCON of South Korean military forces rested primarily with the U.S.-led United Nations Command (UNC). ROK President Syngman Rhee transferred OPCON of his forces to the United States in July 1950 at the beginning of the Korean War. In November 1954, after war's end and with the signing of a treaty of alliance with the U.S., Rhee placed wartime and peacetime OPCON authority with the United Nations Command (UNC)—essentially still under the control of the United States. There OPCON of ROK forces remained for nearly a quarter of a century, with only a ten-day break in May 1961 during General Park Chung Hee's military *coup d'état*.

During the period 1978-1994, the United States retained both wartime and peacetime OPCON over ROK forces through its leadership of the U.S.-ROK Combined Forces Command (CFC). The CFC was created in part to reassure Seoul of the U.S. defense commitment to the ROK in the wake of President Jimmy Carter's planned (but never implemented) withdrawal of the U.S. 2nd Infantry Division from Korea. Since the CFC's establishment in 1978, it was led by a four-star U.S. general who was also the commander of U.S. Forces Korea (USFK) and United Nations Commander (even though a UN resolution had called for dissolution of the UNC).

During the third period, from 1994 to the present, the ROK began a process of reestablishing OPCON over its forces. The transfer of OPCON from the United States to the ROK was first raised by the 1988-1993 administration of President Roh Tae Woo, resulting ultimately in the transfer of peacetime OPCON from CFC to the ROK in December 1994. The step was consistent with post-Cold War changes in the United States' global defense posture, outlined in the East Asia Strategic Initiative (EASI). EASI also called for wartime OPCON to be transferred to the ROK after 1996, but that was postponed because of the growing North Korean nuclear threat.

The United States supported the transfer of peacetime OPCON to the ROK not only for reasons of military strategy but also to avoid unintended involvement in domestic South Korean political controversy. In the 1980 Gwangju incident, South Koreans faulted the United States for the use of ROK military forces against civilian demonstrators. Because the United States held peacetime OPCON, many South Koreans believed that the U.S. could have prevented the situation. In fact, even in peacetime the United States exercised OPCON over only certain ROK units, and the ROK forces that first entered Gwangju and caused most casualties had not been subject to U.S. OPCON.

Even in wartime, the CFC commander's OPCON over South Korean forces was not automatic. He was granted operational control—not the broader right of command—over ROK units specifically designated by the South Korean president. The South Korean president retained all ultimate command of ROK forces, and as a practical matter no U.S. commander could force a Korean president to deploy his forces against his wishes. Thus, according to one U.S. official, the OPCON issue was not accurately described as one of “returning OPCON” because the South Korean president already had the sovereign right to decide which ROK units to assign to the Combined Forces Command.

Nor was the CFC's wartime authority complete. The CFC commander remained responsible even in wartime not only to the U.S. president but also to the ROK president. The two presidents, supported by the U.S. and ROK defense ministers and by the chairmen of the U.S. and ROK Joint Chiefs of Staff operating through the ROK-U.S. Military Committee, provided the CFC commander with strategic guidance.

III. PRESIDENT ROH'S OPCON POLICY

Progressive presidential candidate Roh Moo-hyun's call in 2002 for the return of wartime OPCON shared some nationalistic, political, and strategic impulses with past ROK presidents, while differing in other ways.

In the 1970s, President Park Chung Hee initiated a "self-reliant" national defense policy for South Korea to increase its role and autonomy in the ROK-U.S. alliance. Park's move reflected a growing distrust of U.S. steadfastness after the announcement in 1969 of the Nixon Doctrine that placed primary responsibility for the defense of American allies on the concerned countries themselves. In accordance with the new doctrine, the U.S. in 1971 withdrew the U.S. 7th Infantry Division from the ROK, reducing the manpower of U.S. there from 62,000 to 42,000. President Roh Tae Woo's call in the late 1980s for the return of OPCON was motivated in part by a desire to outflank nationalist and progressive critics who wanted a more equal alliance relationship with the U.S.

President Roh Moo-hyun used the issue of alliance arrangements politically to rally his progressive base, especially the younger generation that had not experienced the Korean War and that was critical of U.S. policy. As a presidential candidate in 2002 during widespread popular demonstrations against USFK over the deaths of two middle school students in a USFK traffic accident, Roh stressed his intention to press for an equal U.S.-ROK alliance.

Roh also justified his policy of reasserting wartime OPCON for new strategic reasons. He argued that, under existing OPCON arrangements, South Korea might unwillingly become involved in hostilities if the United States chose to launch a military strike against North Korean nuclear sites or if the U.S. intervened militarily in a crisis between mainland China and Taiwan. In calling for OPCON, Roh also publicly suggested he was responding to North Korea's refusal to conduct military-to-military and peace negotiations on an equal basis with the South because, North Korea asserted, U.S. wartime OPCON proved that it was actually the U.S. that was in charge of South Korean security.

IV. THE COURSE OF U.S.-ROK OPCON NEGOTIATIONS

As president, Roh continued publicly to call for the return of wartime OPCON, but the issue remained on the back burner of the ROK agenda. President Roh's administration was apparently preoccupied with the second North Korean nuclear crisis that erupted in late 2002 over North Korea's covert uranium enrichment program and with other U.S.-ROK military alliance priorities, including the realignment and reduction of U.S. forces in Korea.

According to a U.S. official, however, the U.S. government anticipated that it would be only a matter of time before the issue of wartime OPCON would need to be actively addressed. Roh's position reflected longstanding South Korean interest in the issue. Numerous U.S. officials affirmed that the United States was indeed transferring wartime OPCON in response to President Roh's call, but the U.S. was also positively disposed to a transfer because it would help implement the concept of "strategic flexibility" as part of the Bush administration's new global security posture. Moreover, Secretary Rumsfeld and other U.S. officials believed that ROK military capabilities had advanced to the point that the ROK could assume wartime OPCON.

Having completed other items on the Bush administration's U.S.-ROK security agenda, the U.S. side thus raised the issue of wartime OPCON at the 37th annual Security Consultative Meeting in October 2005. Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld, noting President Roh's position, said he supported "pushing on an open door." Yet despite President Roh's request, ROK negotiators at the SCM were surprised when the U.S. raised the issue and they were not prepared to discuss it.

While both the U.S. and the ROK favored a transfer of wartime OPCON, their differing motivations and conservative opposition in the ROK led to rancorous negotiations. Americans were offended that President Roh explained the step to South Koreans in terms of a re-assertion of ROK sovereignty against the U.S. The lack of preparation of the ROK negotiators at the SCM talks also allowed time for ROK conservatives to mobilize opposition to the measure. Thus, although the Blue House itself preferred that the transfer take place soon, it was forced by public opinion to take the position that the transfer should not occur before 2012, rather than the U.S. proposal of 2009.

Opponents of the transfer, led by the Grand National Party (GNP) and some former defense ministers and retired generals, expressed concern that the transfer would undermine the U.S.-ROK military alliance, weakening deterrence and putting the ROK at risk of greater casualties and damage in the event of a North Korean attack. They also disagreed with Roh's argument that retrieval of OPCON would result in the DPRK treating the ROK as an equal party in military and peace talks. They stressed that there should be no OPCON talks until the North Korean nuclear issue was resolved.

Opponents further said that the ROK military did not yet have all the capabilities needed to assume wartime OPCON, particularly intelligence and surveillance assets, including AWACS, and airpower. Obtaining such capabilities would take many years and cost an enormous amount of money, they asserted. Some U.S. officials, on the other hand, regarded setting an early date for the transfer of wartime OPCON as a means of forcing ROK defense reform and development, but many current and former ROK military officers were concerned that the ROK government might not fully fund the needed modernization.

While most U.S.-ROK bilateral military agreements had been “conditions-based,” i.e. implemented as capabilities were achieved rather than strictly according to a pre-determined timeline, the U.S. position in favor of a transfer in 2009 was not conditions-based. U.S. officials apparently were concerned that the ROK might manipulate a conditions-based process to delay the transfer.

U.S. officials, speaking privately, said that domestic opposition in the ROK would make it difficult to decide in 2006 on a specific date for the transfer. Both sides expected further, difficult negotiations. The highest levels of the U.S. government sought to avoid rhetoric that might inflame the controversy in the ROK or give hope to ROK opponents that the U.S. might reverse course and seek a delay or even a cancellation of the transfer. Thus, President Bush did not even mention the subject of wartime OPCON during his joint press conference with President Roh on September 14 until President Roh raised it. Of course, President Bush, unlike Roh, did not have to contend with domestic political pressures regarding the issue, although the implications of the OPCON transfer were of considerable concern to U.S. security and Korea experts and Congressional oversight committees had held hearings on the subject.

V. THE PROCESS OF TRANSFERRING OPCON

Switching wartime OPCON from the United States to South Korea would mean disestablishing CFC and creating another bilateral military coordination system in which, according to U.S. Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Asian and Pacific Affairs Richard Lawless, USFK would “support the ROK commander, [but] remain under the command and operational control of an American commander.” The new system would consist of “independent, parallel national commands where the U.S. plays a supporting role to the ROK lead.” The United States would serve, in military jargon, in a “supported supporting relationship,” with small numbers of U.S. military personnel embedded in units in each Korean service to act as liaison.

Many U.S. and ROK officials predicted that the U.S.-ROK military command relationship after the transfer of OPCON would resemble the relationship between U.S. Forces Japan and the Japanese defense establishment. The two forces would operate side-by-side with local counterparts as U.S. forces do everywhere else in the world, according to a U.S. official. Under this model, much of the decision-making apparatus for U.S. forces in Korea would be located in Hawaii at U.S. Pacific Command (PACOM) instead of at USFK headquarters in the ROK. Some U.S. capabilities currently in the ROK, including intelligence, would probably also move to Hawaii.

Media reports suggested that the U.S.-ROK coordinating body succeeding CFC might be named the Cooperative Military Center (CMC) or the Military Cooperation Center (MCC). It would be composed of an equal number of U.S. and ROK staff officers, comprising about ten standing and non-standing organizations commanded by separate and equal U.S. and ROK two-star generals. As of the end of 2006, U.S. and ROK officials were still preparing the draft agreement on the successor organization to the Combined Forces Command.

Some U.S. officials suggested that, with the transfer of OPCON, the United Nations Command might play a more prominent role on the Korean Peninsula, perhaps assuming many of the current functions of CFC. The U.S. and the ROK had already agreed that the U.S.-led UNC should continue to exist following CFC's abolishment.

General Burwell Bell, Commander of CFC, UNC, and USFK, stated that UNC would play an important supporting role in any future conflicts on the Korean Peninsula even though the ROK would have independent command over most South Korean forces. Bell urged that UNC be enhanced to perform such a post-CFC role.

Another U.S. official, however, suggested that the role of UNC, in terms of its daily responsibilities at least, would likely shrink after the transfer of OPCON and the disestablishment of CFC. He pointed out that thereafter Armistice Agreement responsibilities would not be under U.S. command, although the U.S. would maintain overall UNC authority until the signing of a peace treaty formally ending the Korean War. During 2006, the U.S. raised with the ROK the idea of transferring most of the 20 UNC functions currently performed by the U.S. to the ROK. The ROK reportedly would decide by June 2007 what UNC functions it wished to accept from the U.S.

A U.S. official privately said that the U.S. and the ROK would need to ensure that changes to UNC arrangements did not contravene the UN resolution on which the UNC was based. Traditionally, the United Nations exercised very limited oversight of the UNC, basically receiving only a single annual report from the UN Commander.

Many ROK officials expressed concern that dismantlement of CFC would also endanger U.S. support for the ROK in the event of war on the Korean Peninsula. Long-standing CFC Operations Plan (OPLAN) 5027 reportedly called for the United States to dispatch to Korea 690,000 U.S. troops with 1,600 aircraft and 160 ships, including five aircraft carriers, within 90 days of the start of hostilities. U.S. support on that scale might not necessarily be included in a new full-scale war OPLAN under the successor arrangements to CFC.

While the U.S. would remain committed to the defense of the ROK under their Mutual Defense Treaty, a former high-ranking ROK military officer argued that the dispatch of U.S. forces to the ROK would occur automatically and more rapidly under the current OPCON agreement. If only the general provisions of the Mutual Defense Treaty applied, he said, the U.S. Congress would have to take action to authorize U.S. troop deployments.

Despite much speculation on the part of opponents of the transfer that it might mean additional reductions in USFK personnel, Deputy Under Secretary of Defense Lawless repeatedly offered assurances that no further major reductions were planned or anticipated. General Bell said that none of the U.S. troop reductions in Korea were related to the issue of OPCON transfer.

VI. UPGRADING ROK MILITARY CAPABILITIES

In preparation for the transfer of wartime OPCON, the ROK military had been conducting a series of force improvement programs called *Yulgok* since the mid-1970s. In 2006, it was in the midst of “Defense Reform 2020,” which was announced by the ROK government in 2005. Defense Reform 2020 was focused on “transforming the [ROK’s] manpower-oriented, quantitative force structure to an intelligence and knowledge-oriented, technology-intensive force structure.” By 2012, ROK officials said, the reform plan would provide ROK forces with all necessary capabilities to exercise wartime OPCON, with the exception of some “bridging” capabilities that the U.S. committed to continue to provide until the ROK could assume those responsibilities as well. The United States also said it would provide \$10 billion in support for South Korean military modernization.

Over the course of Defense Reform 2020, the current ROK military manpower of 680,000 troops would be reduced to 500,000, and the ROK would acquire early warning aircraft, unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), and reconnaissance satellites to improve its early warning and target acquisition systems. By 2020, ROK forces would strengthen their intelligence, operational planning, and execution and joint battlefield management capabilities. Acquisitions and training for these missions would allow the ROK to assume the C4I (Command, Control, Communications, Computers, and Intelligence) and airpower duties that were being performed by the U.S. The South Korean concept of military reform was to build a traditional force, according to an ROK official, not a mobile one such as USFK. The ROK would focus on short-range transport vehicles, including landing craft, instead of those that could cover long distances.

The South Korean government planned to fund military reform by increasing its defense budget by 6-11% annually beginning in 2006, at a total cost of \$620 billion. Some observers were concerned that President Roh or his successors or the

National Assembly might not support such funding levels. Many ROK officials confidently argued, however, that Defense Reform 2020 was based on a technical military assessment and would be supported by the current and future ROK administrations.

Sometimes unclear in discussions on the upgrading of ROK forces was which capabilities the ROK aimed to match: those of the U.S. or of North Korea. According to a U.S. official, some ROK experts compared the ROK military to the U.S. military when it should actually be compared to that of the North. The US 2nd Infantry Division, according to a ROK official, had more capability than the entire ROK Army core headquarters, the equivalent of four divisions. On the other hand, North Korea’s million-man military vastly outnumbered South Korea’s 680,000 military personnel, but the South’s weapons systems and defense industrial complex were far more advanced than the North’s.

As noted above, the United States promised to provide the ROK with “bridging” capabilities temporarily to help it meet shortfalls in capabilities as OPCON was transferred, and thereafter to provide certain “life of the alliance” capabilities. USFK Commander General Bell stated that South Korea was already capable of taking over full OPCON of its forces by 2009 with little risk, given that the U.S. was prepared to provide such bridging capabilities. Under tentative plans, USFK-provided bridging capabilities would include the continued operation of weapons systems such as the KH-12 satellite, U-2 spy aircraft, and F-16 fighter jet.

VII. PROSPECTS

As of the end of 2006, ROK opponents of the transfer continued to hope that the U.S. government would change course. They argued that the North Korean nuclear weapon and long-range missile tests made an early transfer of wartime OPCON inadvisable. They hoped that the resignation of Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld, who was known to be a very strong supporter of the OPCON transfer, or the December 2007 ROK presidential election or the November 2008 U.S. presidential election might bring about a delay or cancellation in the transfer. It appeared unlikely, however, that the opponents’ hopes would be realized. President Roh continued strongly to support the transfer, and Rumsfeld’s successor as Defense Secretary, Robert Gates, declared at his Senate confirmation hearing that he was committed to the OPCON transfer.