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The OPCON Transfer Debate

By Shelley Su

I. INTRODUCTION

The history of joint operation between the US and Republic of Korea (ROK) militaries dates back to the Korean War and South Korea's inception. At the time, the first ROK President Syngman Rhee (Yi Seungman) placed ROK forces under the control of the United Nations Command (UNC), in which US forces played a significant role. After a military coup in 1961, the UNC's authority was limited to "operational control." In 1978, the Combined Forces Command (CFC) was created, and operational control was shifted to the commander in chief (CINC) of the CFC. By December 1994, the CINC transferred peacetime operational control of South Korean units to the ROK Joint Chiefs of Staff.

This essay addresses the last phase of this process. It first provides an overview of the wartime operational control (OPCON) transfer that was proposed under Presidents Roh Moo-hyun and George W. Bush in 2007. It then discusses the goals of each country and assesses the merits of the three positions on the transfer: to carry out the OPCON transfer on the initially agreed upon transfer date; to reject the OPCON transfer altogether; or to delay its implementation. This essay further examines why the Obama and Lee administrations chose delay as the best course of action.

II. OPCON TRANSFER BACKGROUND

OPCON Transfer Conceived and Delayed

The final step in achieving full autonomy for the ROK military is to return wartime OPCON to South Korea. However, given the continued threat the country faces from the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), it will be difficult to execute a widely supported, seamless, and secure transition. The ROK President Roh Moo-hyun came to power on a largely anti-American platform in 2003, and it was his administration that first proposed the handover in 2007. Since then, there has been much controversy over the necessity and prudence of such a step. On the one hand, the transfer can be seen as a testament to a more capable and bolder South Korea, ready to fend for itself. On the other hand, the transfer can be interpreted as a sign of abandonment by South Korea's staunchest

supporter, the United States.

There is something to the argument that the original proposal for dissolving the CFC and transferring OPCON was borne out of domestic and self-interested politics, not on-the-ground security considerations. During his campaign, President Roh proposed restoring sovereignty to South Korea by regaining wartime OPCON from the United States, and he called for a feasibility study of such a transfer as soon as he was in office. This study evolved into the current Strategic Transition Plan. Similarly, in the United States, Lt. Col. James Minnich suggested in his May-June 2011 *Military Review* article that President George W. Bush and Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld saw the transfer as an opportunity to increase the US military's strategic flexibility in the region. The transfer does not stem from new military circumstances faced by either nation. In Nam Chang-hee's 2007 *Korean Journal of Defense Analysis* article, he reports that conservatives and retired generals lambasted President Roh's plans, accusing him of having a poor understanding of the nature and effectiveness of the current CFC structure. It was yet another example of Roh's mishandling of the US-ROK alliance and a populist pandering to his young generation of supporters. In his keynote address at an American symposium addressing the OPCON transfer, Hwang Jin-ha (a second-term Grand National Party Assemblyman) described the proposal as two nations pursuing their respective interests based on their own strategic missions, not on common objectives for the future; and thus it was an inappropriate agreement.

By late 2009, under the Lee Myung-bak administration, murmurs of delaying the transfer began to emerge. ROK Minister of National Defense Kim Tae-yong said in January 2010 that the proposed transfer date of April 17, 2012 was perhaps the "worst time" imaginable given the DPRK's nuclear weapons posture. After private discussions at the Toronto G-20 in June 2010, Presidents Obama and Lee announced that the OPCON transition would be delayed by three years, to December 2015.

Executive branch ROK officials are hesitant to openly voice their opinions on the OPCON transfer delay, while members of the National Assembly are more forthcoming. Questioned about the transfer, one conservative assemblyman stressed the importance of balancing against China's "southern approach" in foreign policy; he did not consider the delay to be a disadvantage for South Korea. Rather, it was a strategic necessity. On the progressive side, Assemblyman Chung Dong-young, in a November 2011 interview, expressed disappointment and lamented that the OPCON transfer had been delayed.

Transition Plan

The so-called Strategic Alliance 2015 is a roadmap for the OPCON transfer that came out of the Two-plus-Two meetings held in July 2010 between the United States Secretaries of State and Defense and the ROK Foreign and Defense Ministers. In addition to detailing the transition, the plan also outlines new policies for US bases in South Korea. According to a 2010 whitepaper by the ROK Ministry of National Defense (MND), the United States and South Korea will replace the CFC with a “strong new combined defense system” following the OPCON transition. The transfer will disestablish the CFC and put the ROK Joint Chiefs of Staff in the lead, with a newly created US-Korea Command (KORCOM) as the supporting command. Each commander will have control over his or her own forces. Testifying before the US House of Representatives Armed Services Committee in April 2011, General Walter L. Sharp stated that the additional time provided by the delay will allow for synchronizing a “variety of ongoing transformation initiatives of which OPCON transition is just one”; the delay further allows time for the ROK military to strengthen and reinforce its capabilities in intelligence, operations planning and execution, and joint battlefield management.

A smooth transition is of utmost importance for both the United States and South Korea. The United States will provide bridging capabilities for those areas of the ROK forces that are not yet fully functional by the time of the transition, and US forces will continue to act as a deterrent against North Korea. Additionally, the United States will maintain a four-star-general position in South Korea to ease concerns and ensure effective coordination. Both sides are working diligently to meet the new 2015 transition deadline.

Security Goals

The OPCON transfer is both a political and a security issue, and it is impossible to untangle one from the other. The transition will have a direct and immediate impact on the entire Asia-Pacific security architecture and on military tensions between North and South Korea. The OPCON transfer has more than one goal and the transition will have many positive effects, but there will be downsides to achieving these milestones. On the bright side, many US and ROK military goals overlap. Both countries hope to continue their strong alliance. Both also want South Korea to have a strong and self-sustaining military capable of defending itself against the North. Both want to deter DPRK aggression.

Where US and ROK goals begin to differ is on the political side. Progressive voices in South Korea want to stress sovereignty. This might interfere with the US goal of a continued strong presence in Northeast Asia, which includes US forces in both South Korea and Japan. The United States also hopes to gain some strategic flexibility; it does not want constraints placed on its forces deployed to South Korea (US Forces Korea, or USFK). Many South Korean opponents of the OPCON transfer see the CFC and USFK as signals to the rest of the world of the strong US commitment to the Mutual Defense Treaty and to ROK security. In the long run, the United States is perhaps most concerned with North Korea's nuclear weapons threat. Although the nuclear threat also affects South Korea, the South also has to live with the consequences of a potential DPRK collapse. This means that the United States is more likely to focus on the nuclear problem, while South Koreans are more concerned with mitigating the likely chaotic collapse of North Korea. Consequently, South Korea is more likely to want to engage the North in plans for unification rather than only planning for securing nuclear weapons and walking away, as the United States might reasonably hope to do.

Some factions in both the United States and South Korea favor an immediate OPCON transfer, while others oppose the very idea of such a transition. A third group supports delaying the transition until at least December 2015. Such a delay is the best possible outcome because it best addresses both sides' military and political concerns.

III. AN IMMEDIATE OPCON TRANSFER

Perceived Readiness

The main argument for a prompt transition of operational control to South Korea is the positive reflection it would have on the abilities of the ROK military. It would give South Korea, which is quickly becoming a "first-class" country, the dignity and sovereignty it deserves. The OPCON transfer would be a vote of confidence underscoring the great military and economic strides that South Korea has made. A self-sustaining force is a more credible deterrence than the status quo. In March of 2010, Michael O'Hanlon of the Brookings Institution described the ROK military as among the top 10 in the world. To allay fears in South Korea, General Sharp, commander of the CFC, has made reassurances that the transfer will not weaken the US commitment to provide reinforcement on the Korean peninsula, regardless of the changing US force structure.

Former Defense Secretary Robert Gates, in a 2009 visit to the ROK, referred to

the OPCON transfer as South Korea taking the “proper lead role in the defense of its national territory.” Former Defense Secretary Rumsfeld, in response to President Roh’s suggestion of the transfer, said that it was only “natural” for South Korea to take back the reins, and Rumsfeld suggested to the ROK leader that he was “pushing an open door.” If the United States believed the ROK military was unprepared for the transition, and that it would put US soldiers at risk, it would certainly not push for the transfer.

Defense Spending

A fast-tracked, firm deadline for the OPCON transfer would encourage South Korea to assume responsibility for military preparation and defense spending, which would allay US concerns about the ROK free riding on US security. The United States would like to see South Korea share more of the burden of acquiring improved equipment and weapon systems that are compatible with US systems. ROK forces as a whole need improved war-fighting capability, but this is especially true for the navy and air force; likewise, more resources are needed for missile defense and state-of-the-art C4ISR (command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance). South Korea’s commitment to the OPCON transition can be measured through its defense spending and specific military upgrades.

Heritage Institute scholar Bruce Klingner argues in his July 2010 *Korea Times* article, “OPCON Transfer: Timing Isn’t Everything,” that one of the underlying deficiencies of the transfer plan is years of underfunded defense in South Korea. President Roh’s Defense Reform Plan (DRP) was an ambitious military modernization plan meant to turn the ROK military into a leaner and smarter force by 2020, putting more emphasis on sea and air capabilities. It was based on the collective long-term plans of the three military services, the Ministry of National Defense, and the Joint Chiefs of Staff. However, the DRP has been undermined by funding shortfalls. According to Klingner, the plan, conceived in 2005, necessitated approximately \$505 billion over the course of 15 years, which would have required a 9.9 percent military budget increase annually from 2006 through 2010. However, the average increase over those years was only 7.2 percent, and the MND only requested a 6.9 percent increase for the 2011 military budget. The DRP is now dangerously underfunded and behind schedule.

C4ISR spending is not called out in most measurements of defense spending, so it is difficult to assess progress in that area, but these kinds of resources are increasingly important as defense becomes more technological, and it is clear

that South Korea is not budgeting enough for this category. The United States wants to support the OPCON transfer by bridging capabilities and supplying big-ticket items, thereby allowing the ROK military to focus on improving computers and networking. However, South Korea has been more interested in acquiring big defense items for itself rather than focusing on C4ISR. The *Chosun Ilbo* reported in its November 2011 article, “US Worries About Growing Korean Arms Exports” on US concerns about ROK intentions to develop a defense-systems export industry. The United States has even suggested that South Korea might be developing such an industry based on stolen US military technology, a suspicion that arose after South Korea illegally disassembled a Tiger Eye (a key component of the F-15K fighter jet). If such actions are taking place at the expense of C4ISR improvements, the ROK military should reprioritize. The delayed OPCON transfer has given Seoul a second chance at meeting its own military goals, but it must somehow make up for budget deficiencies in time for the transfer in 2015 or risk being dangerously unprepared.

Domestic Realities in Times of Duress

ROK officials are not always strong supporters of US operational control in actual times of duress. In his May 2010 Center for Strategic and International Studies commentary on the OPCON transition, Raymond DuBois describes a serious security breach that happened in 1996 during President Kim Young-sam’s administration. A DPRK defector flew a plane over the Demilitarized Zone into South Korea, and President Kim angrily called for an immediate meeting at the Blue House with everyone “directly responsible for the defense of ROK.” Shockingly, no one from the Combined Forces Command was invited. “As far as the Blue House was concerned,” writes DuBois, “no one really considered the US CFC commander to truly have OPCON, and they further demonstrated that they did not consider him to be a key player in the defense of the peninsula.”

Do South Koreans genuinely trust that the United States will be there for them when the chips are down? Or is South Korea only using US forces as a deterrent against the DPRK and not seriously considering a day when the CFC may actually have to fight together shoulder to shoulder? If South Korea truly values the United States’ continued wartime OPCON, it might insist that CFC headquarters be located adjacent to the MND in Seoul rather than being relocated to Pyongtaek, as is the current plan. If South Korea is using US forces only for show, even to a limited extent, then the situation is at best a waste of both sides’ efforts and at worst dangerous to CFC service members. The CFC and wartime OPCON must be taken seriously. Suh Jae-jung of Johns Hopkins

University describes the ROK military in his 2007 book, *Power, Interest, and Identity in Military Alliances*, as in fact never having had its own doctrine because it has always adopted US military doctrine, regardless of the fluctuations in the actual threat from the DPRK. This cannot possibly be wise for the ROK military. In theory, the CFC and US OPCON may seem ideal, but in reality, it may be a moral hazard for South Korea. The OPCON transition would force the ROK military to be more introspective about its own doctrine and methods, pushing it toward greater self-reliance.

Ideology and Nationalism

Another interesting argument in favor of an immediate OPCON transfer is philosophical, as put forth by John W. Bauer, previous strategist in Special Operations Command Korea in “A Philosophical Case for OPCON Transition on the Korean Peninsula,” published in a 2011 issue of *Joint Forces Quarterly*. Bauer underscores how ideology and nationalism play a large role across the Korean peninsula. The DPRK regime consistently attacks the United States for its “imperialism” in South Korea and the ROK “puppet” government for falling into the US imperialist trap. With the removal of US wartime control over the ROK military, the DPRK loses the substance of this argument. An OPCON transition would thus challenge North Korea’s vision of the world. Further, South Korea could then actually be seen as a compelling alternative in the eyes of the starving and disenfranchised North Korean people.

Looking even farther into the future, in a DPRK collapse and unification scenario, such unification would go more smoothly if the United States was not in the picture. Successful unification must appeal to nationalism, and this would be difficult if the United States still had wartime OPCON of the ROK military. The North Korean people have been taught to believe that Americans are their mortal enemies, so Bauer argues that “the only true remedy for the North’s propaganda apparatus and its ideology of regime control is an ROK government firmly in the lead.” The ROK military must be able to function and make decisions completely independent of the United States or risk DPRK propaganda surviving in the minds of the North Koreans post-unification.

A Natural Course and Strategic Flexibility

The OPCON subordination of one nation’s military to another is not a permanent construct. Both the ROK military’s perpetual dependence on the United States and the weight of the US obligation are unhealthy for the alliance.

Changes to the CFC can be made while still maintaining the integrity of the Mutual Defense Treaty. Some left-wing scholars have suggested that ROK conservatives seek to keep America “hostage” through the CFC, which they argue is more anti-alliance than pro-alliance. In a way, this structure also keeps the ROK military hostage. In the event of a US conflict with China over Taiwan, for example, South Korea fears that it may be dragged into the fight because of its commitment to the CFC and US Forces Korea. Furthermore, when conditions change in the region and a large US military presence in South Korea no longer makes sense, Lieutenant Colonel Minnich predicts that both countries will be “scrambling to justify the future relevance of the alliance,” under heavy criticism from their citizens. Planning for the seemingly inevitable (albeit far-off) departure of US troops from South Korea is underway, for example, in the strengthening of US military ties with Australia; the United States will not be left without a presence in the Asia-Pacific region.

The OPCON transfer will unfetter US forces stationed in South Korea for global use and will finally transition USFK from leading to supporting the ROK military. The United States’ hands are currently tied in the region because it cannot use US troops in South Korea for purposes beyond conflicts on the Korean peninsula, because its forces are “deployed” to South Korea, not “stationed” there. Furthermore, the OPCON transition and CFC dissolution will remove the burden from US commanders of deciding where and how ROK service members should fight. The transfer will allow the US military more strategic flexibility and, as Minnich suggests, will “recast the ROK-US alliance as a comprehensive, strategic alliance for the 21st century” that addresses not just the DPRK problem but the security of the entire Asia-Pacific region. According to the US Department of Defense’s 2010 Quadrennial Defense Review Report, “when fully implemented, this change will enable forces to deploy from Korea, helping to expand the pool of available forces for global contingencies.”

Risks of an Immediate Transfer

The arguments for a prompt OPCON transfer are alluring because they represent certain ideals and also convenience, but ideals do not always prevail in the real world, and the most convenient option is not always the best one. Realistically, an immediate transfer is imprudent because it is too high a risk. ROK officials preach readiness but often do not seem to know where the OPCON transition actually stands. US officials also cannot be certain that an immediate transfer will truly pressure South Korea to meet its own defense spending and military modernization goals. A hasty transfer could leave South Korea vulnerable and

unprepared, with the newly divided forces not fully synced against a very real and continuing DPRK military threat. Such haste would also leave the United States with no sound reasoning to maintain its strong presence in mainland Northeast Asia. The United States may want strategic flexibility in the region, but the greatest threat in Northeast Asia is still North Korea.

IV. INDEFINITE POSTPONEMENT OF AN OPCON TRANSFER

Risks of Interoperability and Joint Operation Atrophy

Command structures are not just about logistics. If they are not coherent, command structures can put lives at risk during wartime. Desert Storm is a recent example of how crucial it is to maintain clear control over a wartime battlefield. Twenty-five percent of American casualties in that conflict resulted from friendly fire. In a modern high-speed, high-precision battlefield, knowing who are enemies and who are friends is vitally important. Sub-theaters are also not easy to separate out within an overall theater of conflict because lines between land, air, and naval operations may overlap. Taking the Desert Storm case, there was unified command, but friendly-fire killings were still numerous. Imagine, then, how complex structures of communication and control would affect risks when engaging with the enemy in the context of the Korean peninsula. The remarkable engagement of US and ROK forces that has been built up over decades would be lost in a transition to ROK leadership, which is a strong argument for postponing the OPCON transfer. As an example, ROK officers currently undergo English-language training, but after the CFC dissolution and OPCON transfer, perhaps such a requirement would be less enforced, and operational communication would suffer.

A Winning Structure

Another argument in favor of postponement is that the current joint structure cannot be improved upon. All ROK units are currently tied into the CFC, which serves as the coordinating body for Seoul's military. This seamless and transparent structure has proven effective and is the best system for deterring and defeating North Korea. Why replace it with two separate command structures that will work together quite differently and likely less effectively? Bruce Bechtol at the US Marine Corps Command and Staff College argued in his October 2011 testimony to the US House of Representatives Committee on Foreign Affairs that the OPCON transfer will create unnecessary bureaucracy and complication, with increased boards, coordination centers, and bureaus. The

transition will thus leave the US-ROK alliance worse off.

Michael O'Hanlon of the Brookings Institution categorically opposes the OPCON transfer, insisting that the command should remain exclusively in American hands for the time being. In a June 2010 Independent Task Force report from the Council on Foreign Relations, O'Hanlon writes,

I believe [the OPCON transfer] is a misnomer; current plans would not achieve OPCON transfer [as] much as the bifurcation of operational control between US and ROK forces on the peninsula, which would significantly complicate wartime operations... Unity of command is such a central principle to successful military operations that I cannot personally support the decision to dismantle it within the US-ROK alliance. Delaying the transfer beyond 2012... might mitigate the problem but does not solve it.

US Presence in Asia

If one of the unstated goals of the United States in South Korea is to have a strong presence in mainland Northeast Asia, beyond countering the DPRK and to perhaps balance China, then handing over OPCON makes the purpose of US troops deployed to South Korea a question for foreign observers. By recognizing the capacity of the ROK military in wartime, the OPCON transfer might encourage Beijing to wonder just what, or whom, the US military presence on the Korean peninsula (in addition to US bases in Japan) is geared toward. If the United States hopes to stay in the region and is using the continuing ROK-DPRK conflict as a crutch, then the OPCON transition would undermine the US argument for staying in South Korea.

Risks of Indefinite Postponement

It is unrealistic to indefinitely put off the OPCON transfer because serious planning and execution have already taken place. Furthermore, such a delay plays into the hands of DPRK rhetoric about US imperialism. It encourages free riding from the ROK military on US security and prolongs US overextension abroad and limits US strategic flexibility in the region. An indefinite delay also keeps South Korea from achieving full autonomy over its military. The OPCON transition and CFC dissolution may violate the key military precept of unity of command during hostilities, but hostilities have been ongoing for more than

50 years. It does not make sense to hold onto this position indefinitely simply because of North Korea's unpredictability.

V. A TEMPORARY DELAY OF AN OPCON TRANSFER

A temporary delay is the most reasonable option for the OPCON transfer plan. The bottom line is that the ROK military will not be prepared by 2012 to take over wartime operational control, and there is no pressing reason for pushing the transfer to happen at that time. Especially in light of recent DPRK provocations (the 2010 sinking of the *Cheonan* and artillery shelling of Yeonpyeong Island), as well as the original transfer date being in an ROK election year and close to the 100th anniversary of Kim Il-sung's birth, the delay was a practical decision in the best interests of both the United States and South Korea.

South Korean Dissent

Early on in OPCON transfer planning, ROK conservatives lambasted such a transition altogether, arguing that it would weaken the deterrence against the North. Opponents gathered 10 million signatures in protest against the measure. In the National Assembly, almost all Grand National Party representatives, which accounts for almost half the legislature, convened a parliamentarian's group and signed a letter opposing the OPCON transfer, which was sent to both the US Secretary of State and Secretary of Defense.

In a 2006 Gallup study, conducted while discussions of the OPCON transition were ongoing, 71 percent of the public was strongly against US forces leaving South Korea. Of course, US forces leaving South Korea is a much more extreme action than an OPCON transition, but ROK sentiment clearly preferred retaining a US presence. The strength of this preference is even more telling because the polling was done during a time when South Korea's public opinion of the United States was at a low point. The Pew Global Attitudes Project does not specifically show the 2006 percentages for favorable/unfavorable ROK public opinion toward the United States, but relatively speaking, the favorability ratings from 2002 to 2007 were low (between 46 and 58 percent) compared with 79 percent favorability ratings more recently in 2010. Even in the early 2000s, with such low favorability, South Koreans wanted US forces in their country. Asked in 2006 if they believed that South Korea could handle its own national defense and security, only 27 percent of respondents said yes, while 66 percent said that a US withdrawal would have a large negative impact on the stability of Northeast Asia.

The South Korean public wants a US military presence in their country for the foreseeable future, largely because of the perceived threat from North Korea. As long as the United States wishes to honor the Mutual Defense Treaty, as long as the DPRK threat exists, and as long as the ROK public expresses a preference for US OPCON over modernizing the ROK military, then the OPCON transfer should be delayed.

Military Realities

The DPRK conventional military forces are still very much a threat to South Korea, despite North Korea not having maneuvered in years and despite the increased strength of ROK conventional forces. Bruce Bechtol says that the DPRK military has continued to focus on its conventional forces even as it has built up its nuclear program; and US and ROK studies suggest mass civilian casualties (up to 200,000) in Seoul would occur on the first day of conventional warfare with North Korea. The ROK military needs more transport aircrafts. In the event of the breakout of war, US forces will primarily supply air support. Currently, the ROK Air Force only has ten C130s, which means that it severely lacks soft and hard transport. At the current level of readiness, an ROK special operation force going to North Korea would have to rely on the US Air Force for transport.

Still, despite South Korea's continued need for US military support, a myth about the ROK military's lack of power and control should be dispelled. South Korea now has, and will also have during wartime, control over its own forces. Bechtol explains:

In wartime and when the national command authority in Seoul agrees to it, the president in South Korea has the final authority, based on the advice by the Minister of National Defense and the Joint Chiefs, designated ROK forces shot to the commandment of CFC, who then answers to both the US and South Korea National Command Authorities and carries out their strategic decisions in command of ROK and the US forces as they carry out war fighting operations under a unified, combined force.

South Korea is not as constrained by the US military as opponents of the OPCON transfer delay might believe. South Korea is more likely to be swayed by US soft power than to begrudgingly acquiesce to US command during wartime

as a result of US operational control. In any case, US and ROK discord is unlikely, given that both sides agree on most defense and security issues.

Lastly, the fact that nuclear weapons are involved makes the stakes that much higher for cohesiveness in operations. In a DPRK collapse scenario, 8–10 nuclear weapons will have to be secured in North Korea before they are tampered with, fired, or sold to enemies of the United States. Will the ROK military be prepared to secure the weapons quickly and safely on its own? There is no doubt that the ROK military is strong. It can imitate US forces and carry out operations very successfully. However, the ROK military has not mastered operational planning for these types of nuclear-recovery operations, nor the invisible mechanisms and logistics often necessary on the civilian side. The ROK military is actively working toward reaching this level of military modernization and cohesion, but it has fallen behind on defense spending and on meeting goals and deadlines. The South Korean military bureaucracy is not yet strong enough to handle such complex operations, and until it is, a hasty OPCON transfer is a bad idea.

Timing and Permanence

The original OPCON transfer date of April 2012 is simply not a practical target. With the still-looming DPRK nuclear threat, the 100th anniversary of Kim Il-sung's birth, Kim Jong-un as the new DPRK leader, and South Korea's election year on the horizon, North Korea might be emboldened by an OPCON transition to strike at South Korea. As long as North Korea is a nuclear state, an OPCON transfer is going to be a dangerous move.

While those inside the conservative ROK government and military stress readiness by 2015 and the political suicide linked to another delay, outsiders are dubious. The unpredictability of South Korea's domestic politics and relations with North Korea will always have an impact on how and when the transfer moves forward. Unless a serious change in geopolitical circumstances requires the United States to retain wartime operational control, it seems that the OPCON transfer will take place sometime in the near future, if not in December 2015. Once South Korea takes control of its OPCON, such control can likely never be returned to the United States. The transition has been under discussion for almost a decade, and both sides have been preparing for it, so it is highly unlikely that the transfer will go back to "indefinite" status. Risks associated with a further delayed OPCON transfer are that it will be seen as a political fumble for both or either side, a chance that the transfer will not take place for a prolonged period, and that the result might be an inferior and bifurcated military force.

VI .DELAY AS THE FINAL OUTCOME

After discussions at the highest levels in both countries, the decision was made to delay the OPCON transfer. Nevertheless, the transition should still happen in the near future, either after ROK forces have achieved the recommended capability (hopefully by December 2015, a more likely possibility) or the DPRK nuclear program is no longer a threat (a less likely possibility). Furthermore, the reasons for the delay should be clearly explained to the South Korean people. The delay gives the ROK military time to prepare itself for OPCON and gives both the United States and South Korea time to better sync the new forces system in the face of the continuing DPRK threat. In the meantime, the ROK military can work on its necessary procurement and readiness training, and US Forces Korea can continue to support and provide bridging capability. Although the OPCON transition risks creating two less integrated forces, the transfer is necessary for the sake of placing confidence in the ROK military and giving ROK forces the full sovereignty they should ultimately have. No one can predict or plan for future DPRK actions, and the Combined Forces Command cannot wait indefinitely simply because the threat continues to exist. The US and ROK militaries must move forward with their OPCON transfer plan, but with caution in light of the risks the transition entails.

Since the decision to delay the transfer was made in June 2010, and since the Yeonpyeong shelling incident in November 2010, ROK officials have been reticent to give opinions about the OPCON transition delay. Most statements have been about the progress being made. Both US and ROK forces have continued to work toward the transfer, despite political party changes in both countries. This is a good sign, because it suggests that the issue is not as polarized as one might imagine. Both countries understand that they are allied nations even when presidential administrations change. Both sides recognize that a commitment has been made; for better or worse, they are working toward making the transfer happen despite the “glacially slow” progress as Bruce Klingner described in a July 2010 *Korea Times* article on transforming the military relationship. The OPCON transfer was alluded to in the United States’ 2010 Quadrennial Defense Review and was featured in the South Korea’s 2010 Ministry of National Defense whitepaper. Since the 2010 decision to delay the OPCON transfer, there have been no suggestions of a further delay, but it is too early to say whether or not another delay will happen. Currently, the only issues holding back the transfer are South Korea’s insufficient defense spending and North Korea’s continuing unpredictable, violent, and aggressive actions.

VII. CONCLUSION

In the end, the original reasoning for the OPCON transfer should not dictate an assessment of how wise the transfer is or when and how it should take place. It does not matter that the transfer idea was initiated during a time of anti-US sentiment in South Korea, as both countries have now embraced it. What should be of greatest consideration now is where the transfer is headed and how best to execute the policy in terms of preparedness, and timing in the midst of continuing outside threats. The OPCON transition will strengthen the US-ROK alliance while improving sovereignty for South Korea, increasing strategic flexibility for the United States, and hopefully resulting in a stronger and more self-sustaining ROK military. The transfer plan as outlined will also prove to South Korea that the United States remains committed to South Korea's security, even when the United States no longer holds OPCON. The transfer will also require the United States to rethink its force posture in the region, a long overdue reevaluation that might benefit US forces.

Alliances provide a net benefit for the countries involved, but not without sacrifices, because they also require diminished sovereignty. Governments in an alliance have to at times make compromises against their fundamental interests in order to maintain the relationship. In the case of the United States and South Korea, the greater goal of security and stability in the Northeast Asia region is worth the sacrifice the alliance requires. The Obama and Lee administrations decided that the delayed OPCON transfer was the option that best met the goals of both countries, and it is the most sensible course of action for the alliance to take.

Appendix I

OPCON Transfer Timeline

- February 2007 OPCON transfer agreement made during the Roh and Bush administrations' Security Consultative Meeting, with the transfer date set for April 2012
- February 2008 President Lee Myung-bak (GNP) enters office
- October 2009 Statements made after the Security Consultative Meeting suggest the OPCON transfer is proceeding on time despite whisperings of a possible delay
- January 2010 ROK Minister of National Defense Kim Tae-yong declares 2012 the "worst time" for the transfer, given the DPRK's nuclear weapons posture
- March 2010 Sinking of the *Cheonan*
- June 2010 Decision to delay the transfer to December 2015 is announced
- November 2010 Artillery shelling of Yeonpyeong Island
- April 2012 Initial OPCON transfer date
- December 2015 Current proposed OPCON transfer date



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