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# South Korea's Operational Control During the Korean War and After: Strategy for the Transition of Wartime Operational Control

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**Abstract:** During the Korean War, President Syngman Rhee delegated his command authority over the Republic of Korea (ROK) forces to General Douglas MacArthur, Commander of the United Nations Command (UNC) on July 14, 1950. The delegation of operation control (OPCON) enabled the UNC to wage war under the unity of command and interdict the expansion of communism, as well as protect liberal democracy and the ROK's territory. Lessons from the Korean War are meaningful. If the ROK did not take the lead in waging war and could not exercise operational control over its forces, we can assume that there would have been conflict between the ROK government's war objective and the UNC's war objective. The ROK government pursued an independent, liberal democratic unified Korea by seizing the Yalu River as its consistent war objective. However, the UNC pursued inconsistent war objectives, such as the recovery of the 38th parallel, the establishment of a liberal unified government, honorable withdrawal, and the end of the Korean War by truce. The Koreanization of the ROK defense is natural. This will take place through the complete transition of operational control along with the great growth of the ROK's national power, as well as the evolution of the ROK-US alliance. The transition of wartime operational control can be achieved by the ROK's vision, strategy, capabilities and national will. The moment the OPCON transition comes into being as of Jan 1, 2021 as planned, the ROK will stand up to cope with the North Korean threat.

**Keywords:** The Korean War, Operational Control, United Nations Command, The Transition of Wartime Operational Control, Vision and Strategy, A Peace Regime, A Democratic Unified Korea

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## 1. Introduction

President Syngman Rhee delegated his command authority over the ROK forces to General Douglas MacArthur, Commander of the United Nations Command (UNC) on July 14, 1950. The delegation of operation control (OPCON) enabled the UNC to wage war under the unity of command and interdict the expansion of communism, as well as protect liberal democracy and the ROK's territory.

The peacetime operational control was transferred to ROK Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) from ROK/US Combined Forces Command in 1994. The Roh Moo-hyun administration took the initiative in the transition of wartime OPCON. The ROK and US governments reached an agreement for the transition of wartime OPCON as of April 14, 2012. However because of the 2010 sinking of the Cheonan and the shelling of Yeonpyung Island, as well as North Korea's incessant nuclear

tests and missile experiment fire, the ROK-US pursued a conditions-based transition of wartime OPCON in 2014. In June 2017, President Moon Jae-in and President Donald Trump reached an agreement to expeditiously carry out the conditions-based transfer of wartime operational control. The Moon Jae-in administration has pursued early transition of the OPCON as a government project.

The paper will address President Syngman Rhee's national initiative and unification campaign. The paper will discuss the Korean War's contending issues, such as conflict between the ROK's and UNC's war objectives, and challenges including crossing the 38th parallel, jurisdiction authority over the North, and withdrawing OPCON from UNC. The paper will then draw implications by reflecting on the progress of the OPCON from the armistice to the present.

Finally, the paper will assess the ROK-US alliance's contributions and malfunctions. The paper will address the

purpose and significance of the wartime OPCON's transfer and then propose implementation strategies for the OPCON transition in terms of the trinity of the people, government and military. Lastly visualizing the future of the wartime OPCON transfer, the paper will develop a roadmap for the transition of wartime operational control.

## **2. The Korean War and President Syngman Rhee, and Operational Control**

### **2.1. President Rhee's Independent State Initiative and Unification Campaign**

Prior to becoming the first President of the Republic of Korea in 1948, Dr. Syngman Rhee [1]. visualized a state initiative based on independence and unification as well as the human freedom [2]; to build a independent country through the spirit of Korean independence [3]; achieve a unified Korea based on all people's politics, society, economic, and education justice; exercise exclusive sovereignty over the territorial integrity and activate the armed forces for the national defense; and finally establish friendly relations with freedom-loving nations and enhance reciprocal trade.

President Rhee's unification campaign was based on liberating North Korea's brotherhood under the harsh rule of the Communist Party. President Rhee demonstrated his determination by ordering the ROK forces' to cross the 38th Parallel, march toward the North, and seize the Yalu and Tumen River. He also strongly opposed the truce talks which would permanently establish the division of the Peninsula, withdraw the OPCON from UNC and attempted to conduct independent counter-offensive operations in order to achieve a liberal democratic unified Korea [4].

### **2.2. Background and Contents of OPCON Transfer**

The Republic of Korea encountered one of the most critical national crises as Seoul collapsed within three days of North Korea invading the ROK. The ROK forces had to conduct a delaying action. On July 7, the United Nations passed the activation of a unified command and on July 13 the US government designated General Douglas MacArthur, the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers (SCAP) as UNC commander. General Walton H. Walker was in charge of commanding ground forces as the 8th Army commander in Korea and arrived in Taegu on July 13 [5].

On July 13, President Rhee consulted with the military leaders, including Shin Sung-mo Defense Minister and General Chung Il-kwon ROK Army Chief of Staff, on the letter [6] which contained the transfer of the ROK forces' command authority to UNC commander.

General Chung pointed out that the ROK's forces organization and personnel management authority should be exercised by the ROK. He was worried that the ROK forces

would not be able to conduct essential operations for a unified Korea in the event of the worst possible situation. President Rhee reminded the military leadership that it was inevitable for the ROK to temporarily change control of the war participating forces because of the critical national crisis. However, President Rhee also made it clear that he would recover the command authority if and when necessary [7].

President Rhee's letter symbolizing the transfer of the ROK's command authority refers to his agreement with the UNC's participation in the Korean War. It is understood that President Rhee perceived the command authority as the operation control which excluded personnel and logistic authority and would exercise the authority of cross-attachment and provision of the operational areas of responsibility [8].

### **2.3. Command Structure of the Korean War**

There were multi-layered command structures for the friendly forces. War guidance was issued from UN, the White House and the Pentagon, as well as the ROK wartime cabinet initiated by President Rhee. Combined operations were commanded by the UNC commander in Tokyo and the 8th Army commander conducted ground operations in Korea.

The command structure during the Korean War was as follows: In the initial stages of the war, the UNC commander conducted the ground operations through the 8th Army commander. After the Incheon landing operations and the Wonsan landing operations, the UNC exercised operational controls through the 8th Army in the west and the US X Corps in the east. In the west, the 8th Army consisted of the US I Corps, IX Corps, and ROK II Corps. The ROK Army Chief of Staff exercised operational control over the III Corps. In the east, the X Corps commander exercised operational control over its Corps and ROK I Corps.

The Chinese forces' offensive operations in May 1951 which forced the ROK's III Corps to disintegrate had an adverse influence on the command structure of the UNC. The forward command post from ROK Army HQs was closed down. General Chung Il-kwon was excluded from the chain of operational command [9].

### **2.4. The Operational Control Transfer's Impact on the Korean War**

#### **a. Crossing the 38th Parallel**

After the Incheon landing operations, President Rhee emphasized the continuity of the momentum of offensive through his dialogue with General MacArthur at the ceremony for recovering Seoul on Sep 28. President Rhee insisted that the loss of offensive momentum might allow the enemy to reorganize its forces. General MacArthur responded that the total counter-offensive operations commencing from the Incheon landing operations which expelled the invasion forces and the military pursuit was considered as the victors' right. He told President Rhee, "The UNC will allow the enemy to surrender. If not, then we will march towards the North" [10].

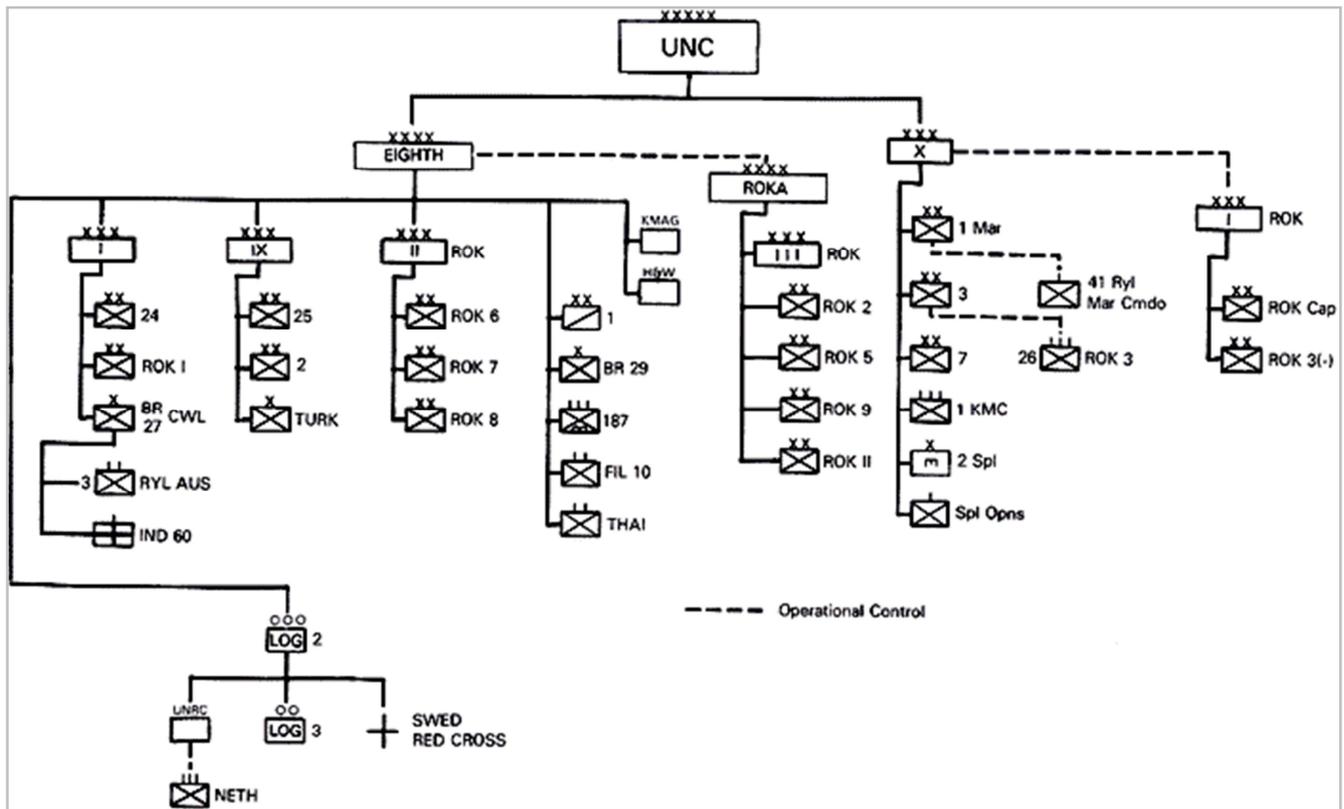


Figure 1. The Command Structure of UNC during the Korean War.

Source: Chung, Kyung-young, "An Analysis of ROK-U.S. Military Command Relations from the Korean War to the Seoul Olympic Games," Master of Military Art and Science Thesis, U.S. Army Command & General Staff College, June, 1989, p. 47.

Rhee pointed out that the Soviet Union had been telling the North Koreans the war had been instigated by the US, in order that American troops might take over the rule of all Korea. He said, "If American soldiers do move into the cities and villages and try to govern them, this Soviet propaganda will seem to be true and the people of the north will feel that they must fight to defend their nation against foreign imperialism." President Rhee's arguments were not well received, and the US Army officers moved into areas to set up a new military government [11].

The plan for crossing the 38th parallel to destroy all the hostile forces on the peninsula had required prior approval from Washington, for the implications of such a crossing were manifold. China had been sending threats by radio almost daily that it would enter the war if North Korea were invaded and there was some feeling that the Soviet Union might also feel called upon to step in once the symbolic line in the sand had been crossed [12].

President Rhee discussed penetration along the 38th parallel at the wartime cabinet meeting on Sep 30, 1950. Chung Il-kwon reported the UNC's instructions to President Rhee that no units were to cross the 38th Parallel without the UNC commander's order. President Rhee pointed out the uselessness of the parallel which Kim Il-sung had already trampled over. He said, "Because I voluntarily delegated the command authority to the UNC, the OPCON withdrawal is

up to me if necessary." President Rhee then instructed General Chung Army Chief of Staff, saying, "Let the ROK forces immediately cross the 38th parallel" signed by President Rhee on Sep 30, 1950.

The ROK army crossed the 38th parallel along the East Sea coast as of 11:30 on Oct 1, 1950, then, continued to attack towards the North.

In the meantime, the UN approved the penetration as of Oct 7, and passed the resolution for a liberal independent unified Korea. US I Corps penetrated the 38th Parallel on Oct 9 in the west which lost the momentum of the attack ten days later after recovering Seoul and allowed the North to reorganize themselves [13].

b. The UNC's Jurisdiction Authority over the North

The UNC's jurisdiction authority over the North conflicted with President Rhee's self-national determinism in regard to the North. President Rhee insisted that the destiny of Korea should be determined by the Korean people. President Rhee emphasized that the eventual unification and peace could be achieved by winning the hearts and minds of the North Koreans, and was to be initiated by the ROK government. A liberal, independent unified Korea should not be intervened in by any other external agencies [14].

The ROK 1st Division as the leading element of the US I Corps captured Pyongyang on Oct 19 by marching towards the North 20km per day, a distance of 170km from Korangpo

to Pyongyang. On Oct 30, President Rhee attended the welcoming ceremony celebrated by the Pyongyang's residents. He delivered a memorable speech at the ceremony, "We as the same national brotherhood will not be separated any longer. Let us achieve unification!"

c. ROK Forces' Independent March towards the North by Withdrawing OPCON due to Protest against the Truce Talks

Chinese intervention carried out using the tactics of the 'human wave' compelled the UN forces to conduct retrograde actions and finally the UNC addressed the truce talks. President Rhee vehemently protested the truce talks.

In the event of a truce negotiation, the ROK government could seriously consider the withdrawal of OPCON from the UNC and pursue independent operations. President Rhee tasked General Chung Il-kwon with demonstrating the ROK soldiers' aspiration to march towards the North and if necessary, conduct independent operations.

The US developed Everready Operation as part of a conspiracy plan to remove President Rhee who's ideas conflicted with the UNC and US. If President Rhee would continuously not agree to the truce, the US would attempt to let Prime Minister Chang Taek-sang to assume a new government by coup d'Etat [15].

On June 25, 1953, Walter Robertson as assistant Secretary of State for the Far East negotiated with President Rhee as special envoy for 18 days. Eventually Dulles as Secretary of State and Byun Young-tae Foreign Minister initialed the ROK-U.S. Mutual Defense Treaty.

The Armistice Agreement was signed at 10:00 July 27, 1953 and fire was suspended as of 22:00 that day.

The transfer of OPCON to the UNC during the Korean War had both a positive and negative impact. The OPCON transfer enabled the UNC commander to conduct military operations under the unity of command and to contribute to interdicting the communism expansion [16].

In the course of waging the Korean War, the ROK government encountered challenges from the UNC such as the 38th parallel penetration, jurisdiction authority over the North, and OPCON withdrawal from the UNC.

The ROK's government had limitations in its ability to wage war due to the conflict between the ROK's and the UNC's war objectives. The ROK government pursued its consistent national unification goals by recovering the Yalu and Tumen Rivers. In the meantime, the UNC's war objectives were inconsistent including the recovery of the 38th Parallel, the establishment of a liberal, unified government, honorific withdrawal, and end of the Korean War through armistice.

As far as the US were to take the lead in waging any future war on the peninsula by exercising operational control over the ROK forces, similar conflict and challenges could be followed, including operational control as a cross-attachment of multinational forces and provisions of responsibility areas of operation in accordance with doctrine [17].

In addition, the war objectives of the countries involved in the war might conflict and could have an impact on the post-hostility actions. The country and territory throughout history

from the ancient past to the present retains the soul of the Korean people and the indigenous soldiers should protect freedom and democracy and defend their territory. The ROK government should have recovered the operational control over their forces from the UNC after the Korean War because OPCON was delegated only during the period of the continuation of the present state of hostilities.

### **3. Retrospect on the Historical Process of OPCON After the Armistice**

#### **3.1. Post-Armistice to Participation in the Vietnam War**

The ROK-US Agreed Minutes was signed on Nov 17, 1954: Retain Republic of Korea forces under the operational control of the UNC so that Command has responsibilities for the defense of the ROK [18]. The ROK-US Mutual Defense Treaty was signed in order to deter war on the peninsula. The OPCON by the Agreed Minutes was a mechanism for the UNC to control the ROK forces so as to prevent any possible hostile actions. The command structure has led the ROK forces to rely on the ally.

As of July 1, 1957, the UNC was relocated at Yongsan in Seoul and the UNC commander had more job-titles as United States Forces and 8th Army commanders.

The US I Corps, consisting of US 2nd and 7th Divisions, and the ROK V and VI Corps exercised operational control over the western and central frontline. The First Republic of Korea Army, consisting of II and III Corps, was in charge of the eastern frontline. After the North Korea guerrilla infiltration to assassinate President Park Chung-hee on Jan 21, 1968, the ROK-US governments agreed on a delegation of counter-infiltration operation authority to the ROK forces at the 1st ROK-US Defense Ministerial Talks held in May, 1968 in Washington, D. C. [19].

On April 2, 1971, the 7th Division withdrew from Korea. The ROK-US I Corps (Group) which was activated on July 1, 1971 exercised operational control over the western frontline and the First Republic of Korea Army (FROKA) over the eastern frontline. As a result of the withdrawal of the ROK forces from the Vietnam War, the Third Republic of Korea Army was activated on July 1, 1973 in order to reinforce the metropolitan defense against the North.

President Park Chung-hee pursued a self-reliant defense campaign. In particular, he provided direction for a self-reliant defense during his visit to the 1973 Ulchi Exercise at Ministry of National Defense. Here he advocated the country develop a military strategy and military power for self-reliant defense; develop a long-term military strategy plan in the event of the transfer of operational control; modernize weapons and equipment in accordance with the heavy chemical industry growth; and finally, develop a military strategy and force modernization, assuming that there would be no US troops in the 1980s [20].

### **3.2. Activation of Combined Forces Command to the Post-Cold War Era**

The establishment of the ROK/US CFC on Nov 7, 1978 was significantly meaningful. It systematically strengthened the ROK-US alliance by building a combined defense system that allowed unified operations of both countries' militaries [21].

Operational control exercised by the UNC was transferred to ROK-US Combined Forces Command. The ROK-US I Corps was reorganized as the Combined Field Army (CFA, ROK/US) on Mar 14, 1980. The CFA exercised OPCON over the V and VI Corps with the US 2nd Division. TROKA was in charge of defending the western frontline by I Corps and Capital Corps.

During the post-Cold War era due to the dissolution of the Soviet Union in Dec 1991, the Koreanization of the Korean Peninsular defense was on-going in accordance with the US East Asia Security Initiative. The ROK general officer was designated the senior representative of the Military Armistice Commission of the UNC. The deputy commander of the CFC was assumed as commander of Ground Component Command. When the CFA was deactivated on June 30, 1992, TROKA took over the operational control of the V and VI Corps.

Peacetime operational control was transferred to the ROK Joint Chiefs of Staff as of Dec 1, 1994. Prior to the upgrade of DEF-III, the ROK JCS were able to exercise unit employment authority over its forces, including troop movement, security missions, surveillance activities, and joint tactical exercises. The CFC commander still exercised combined delegated authority (CODA). This included combined crisis management, war plan deliberate planning, combined joint doctrine development, the planning and conducting of combined joint training and exercises, combined intelligence management, and C4I interoperability [22].

### **3.3. From the Roh Moo-hyun Administration to the Park Geun-hye Administration**

The ROK and US governments agreed to develop a desirability of command structure at the Military Commission Meeting held in December 2002, Washington D. C. This was designed to recognize the ROK's enhanced national power, international status, national self-respect, the ROK forces capability and finally to implement the US strategic flexibility for coping with the 21st century's threat including terrorism and the rise of China.

The ROK-US governments signed a Memorandum of Understanding for USFK Ten Military Mission Transfer on Nov 7, 2003. As of Sep 2008, the following ten missions were transferred to the ROK forces: decontamination operation missions for rear area, JSA security and assistance missions, Management of the air-to-ground firing range, Rapid Minefield Installation, Counter-fire HQs Mission, Control of Main Supply Routes, Counter-Maritime Special Operations, Control Mission for Close Air Support, Metro

Forecast Provision for Combined Forces, and finally Night Search and Rescue Operations [23].

On Sep 9, 2006, President Roh Moo-hyun and President George W. Bush, Jr. agreed on the basic principles of the transition of wartime operational control and on Feb 23, 2007, ROK Defense Minister Kim Jang-soo and US Secretary of Defense Robert Gates agreed on the transition of wartime OPCON as of April 17, 2012.

However, due to the increasingly direct threats from North Korea, including repeated nuclear tests, the sinking of the Cheonan Warship, and the signatures of 10 million ROK citizens against the transition of wartime operation control, on June 27, 2010, President Lee Myung-bak agreed with President Barack Obama to the postponement of the transition of the wartime OPCON as of Dec 1, 2015. In addition, the Park Gyn-hye administration recognized the further seriousness of the long ballistic missile fire on Dec 12, 2012 and the 3rd nuclear test on Feb 12, 2013, and so the two allies agreed on a Conditions-based transition of wartime OPCON through the 2014 Security Consultative Meeting [24].

### **3.4. The Moon Jae-in Administration and Early Transition of Wartime OPCON**

On June 30, 2017, President Moon Jae-in and President Donald Trump decided to continue the alliance's work to expeditiously enable the conditions-based transfer of wartime operational control of ROK forces [25]. On July 9, 2017, the Moon Jae-in administration adopted the early transition of wartime operational control as a government project [26].

On Oct 28, 2017, the two military leaders agreed on the following areas: "The ROK-US will mutually revise the conditions-based transfer of wartime operational control at the 49th SCM, including strategic documents and operational plans. The two sides also decided to reexamine the implementation plans for OPCON transition, such as the alliance capability acquisition plans, Terms of Reference-Relationship (TOR-R) and Operation Plan, and combined exercises and certification plans, and to jointly update the Conditions-Based OPCON Transition Plan (COTP) by the 50th SCM in Oct 2018 [27].

The evolution of operation control has kept abreast with the evolution of the ROK-US alliance. The ROK forces-led combined readiness posture is thus supposed to emerge. The reasons why the transition of wartime OPCON was not implemented in spite of the ROK-US summit agreement three times have been the sinking of the Cheonan Warship, the shelling of Yeonpyong Island, the long ballistic missile testing, the nuclear tests, and path dependence. Irrespective of these occurrences, it is not normal for a sovereign state to experience what the ROK has gone through.

## **4. Assessment of ROK-US Alliance Contributions and Malfunctions**

In the past 66 years since the ROK-US Mutual Defense

Treaty was signed, the alliance has deterred war on the peninsula and maintained peace. The alliance has also made great contributions to the ROK's economic development and political democratization. The ROK's economic power is overwhelmingly 49 times larger than that of North Korea in

terms of GDP, while trade size is 146 times larger, as shown in table 1. Liberal democracy and free market economic systems symbolically supersede North Korea's supreme leader politics and controlled economic systems.

*Table 1. North- South Korea National Power.*

Class	GDP (\$)	GNI (\$)	Trade (\$)	Population	Defense Expenditure	Military Strength
ROK	1.49 trillion	30,940	1.75 trillion	50,617,000	40.0 billion	625,000
North Korea	26.7 billion	1,390	7.3 billion	24,662,000	4.48 billion	1,200,000

Source: Central Intelligence Agency, *The CIA World Factbook 2017* (New York: Skyhorse Publishing, 2016).

The alliance merged in blood through the Korean War has enabled the ROK forces to wage modern war by establishing the C4ISRPGM (Command Control Communication Computer Intelligence Surveillance Reconnaissance Precision-Guided Munition) systems and maintaining peace. The ROK forces are strong and well motivated enough to successfully defeat the enemy should deterrence fail.

In the meantime, the ROK excessively relies on the military alliance. Some Koreans, even a minority of ROK soldiers, perceive themselves as unable to defend their country without US security assistance and unable to win a war without US forces.

This perception reveals that the transition of wartime operational control has not yet been implemented even though more than ten years have elapsed since the ROK-US presidents agreed upon the wartime OPCON transition.

The ROK has still not exercised operational control over its forces. Since the ROK government delegated the OPCON to the UNC, and later the CFC, the national security's reliance on the alliance seems to be normal and natural. However, it remains an abnormal national defense.

Second, the ROK's security reliance on the alliance has severely impacted the ROK armed forces identity. The ROK forces did not establish their identity based on Korean national military thought and military strategy.

Third, the autonomy of military power employment has not been exercised by the ROK military. Regardless of North Korea's incessant military provocations and terrorist brutalities against the South since the armistice agreement in 1953 [28], why have the ROK forces been unable to retaliate against the North's illegal, barbarian hostilities [29]?

North Korea has exploited the vulnerability of the alliance and has violated the Armistice Agreement by provocation and terrorism. The UNC rule of engagement has contributed to deterring war on the peninsula, however it has failed in preventing North Korea's brutal provocations due to the constraints of the ROK military power's employment.

As of June 29, 2018, US Forces in Korea terminated the Yongsan era and kicked off the Pyongtaek era by relocating its command to Camp Humphreys. USFK, which had dedicated itself to defend the ROK, has the strategic flexibility to cope with any contingency in the Indo-Pacific region.

The ROK government should establish a ROK-led new combined defense posture through the early transition of wartime operational control and any contingency regardless

of the reduction or withdrawal of US forces in Korea, or any breakdown of the denuclearization negotiations or collaboration.

## 5. Significance and Strategy for Wartime OPCON Transition

### 5.1. Significance of Wartime OPCON Transition

The transition of wartime operational control aims at defending the ROK territory by national will and strategy based on its overwhelming national power superiority over the North. The landowners of the ROK should protect liberal democracy and defend the country's territorial integrity rather than rely so heavily on their ally who operates as a guest.

By achieving the unity of peacetime and wartime command, the ROK forces will deter war. Yet if deterrence fails, the ROK should achieve victory in any war and create a liberal independent unified Korea.

The wartime OPCON transition is significant for the following reasons: First, the wartime OPCON transition is symbolic of the ROK's self-reliant defense and the Koreanization of the defense on the Korea peninsula in accordance with East Asia Security Initiative (EASI).

Second, the OPCON transition can contribute to enhancing the civil trust in the military and fostering military self-respect. Recovering the autonomy of the military, the ROK can deter the North's provocations, thus prompt and decisive retaliation can be taken and the North will come to fear the ROK forces.

Third, the ROK government will pursue peacetime and wartime unification strategies through exercising operational control over its forces. This will be achieved by building a peace regime on the peninsula, by arms reduction, control, and ultimately a peace treaty. In the event of contingency, if the ROK takes the lead in waging war, then China will become less likely to intervene in another Korean War and unify the divided peninsula.

Finally, the defense industry should be reinforced in order to provide the weapon systems and equipment for the ROK forces which conduct military operations on the unique terrain and form a vital part of the ROK's military strategy, tactics and doctrine.

### 5.2. Trinity Strategy of People, Government and Military for the OPCON Transition

Three conditions for wartime OPCON transition of identified critical military capabilities that the Republic of Korean military must develop to meet the conditions of OPCON transition include: first, securing core combat power for ROK-led combined operations, second, securing essential combat power for coping with North Korea's nuclear and missile threats, and third, improving the broader security environment.

Carl von Clausewitz advocates a trinity composed of the people, government, and the military in order to win war [30].

The trinity is truly imperative for OPCON transition. First, the ROK people promote a sense of self-reliant security based on the overwhelmingly national power superiority that it has over North Korea.

For the ROK government, it is essential for the President as Commander-in-Chief of the ROK forces to host a bi-annual wartime OPCON Transition Preparation Conference in order to confirm the three conditions of the implementation status, war guidance system, and financial assurance by increasing the defense budget. The National Security Office needs to agree with US National Security Council for a target year of the OPCON transition. The ROK government should improve the security environment by building a peace regime on the peninsula through the denuclearization of North Korean nuclear programs and arms control reduction along with signing a peace treaty and

institutionalizing a regional security regime [31].

From the ROK military's perspective, the tri-axis systems consisting of kill-chain, Korea Air Missile Defense, and Korea Massive Punishment and retaliation should be modernized early, regardless of the denuclearization process. Furthermore, a contingency should be developed in the event of any negotiation break-down or collaboration, such as the non-proliferation and non-ICBMs. Strategic Command should be activated. In addition, the upper command structure from the Army, Navy and Air Force Chiefs of Staff should be under the unity of command of the Chairman ROK Joint Chiefs of Staff. In particular, the ROK military should enhance war-fighting capabilities-including military strategy, strategic and operational intelligence estimates, operational planning, counter-fire and war command capabilities.

### 5.3. Outlook on Post-OPCON Transition

What will a post-OPCON transition look like? The command structure, combat power structure, command relations with the UNC, and a vision of the ROK-US alliance require discussion. A U.S. general officer will change roles to serve as the Deputy Commander of the future combined command and remain commander of the UNC and USFK. US forces will continue to operate under US national authorities [32]. In addition, at the 50th Security Consultative Meeting in October 2018, US Secretary of Defense and ROK Minister of Defense agreed that the future CFC is to have a ROK four-star general as the commander and a US four-star general as the Deputy Commander [33].

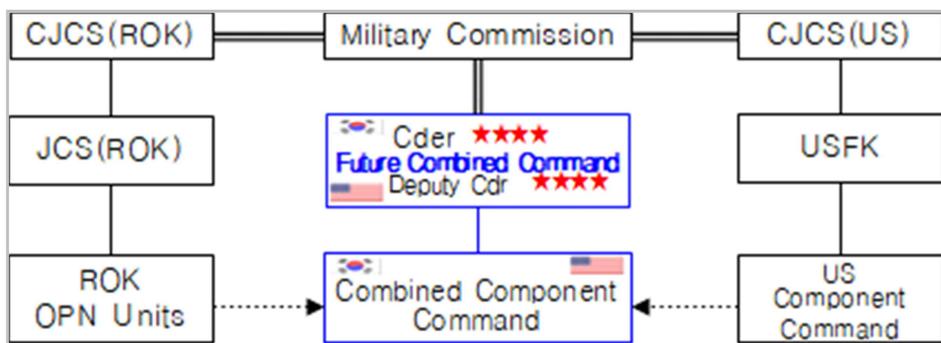


Figure 2. Command Structure for Future Combined Command.

Source: Chung Kyung-young·Choi Yong-ho, eds., *ROK-US Alliance and International Cooperation towards a Unified Korea* (Seoul: KCP7·27 Publishing Co., 2018), p. 117.

The structure for combat power is to retain the ROK led military capabilities. The tri-axis combat power, intelligence surveillance, counter-fire, deep strike assets should be the priorities of force modernization. Moreover, insufficient combat assets should be developed by bridging the capabilities from the combined assets. In addition, uncertain threats should be seriously considered as part of the mid-long term combat power in order to prepare for the post-unification era.

Command relations between the future combined command and the UNC should also be clarified. During the armistice time, the UNC continues to play a key role in

managing the armistice and will play a peace keeping role after the signing of the peace treaty.

In the meantime, the role of the UNC should be that of a force provider role. Under the contingency situation, the commander and future combined command should exercise tactical control over the multinational forces for counter-disaster and counter-insurgency operations, as well as peace enforcement operations. The exception is the counter-WMD operations which are to be commanded by the UNC along with the ROK forces' security support.

Finally, a vision of the alliance is as follows: from the Korean peninsula's perspective, the ROK-US alliance

should be the ROK forces led combined defense systems, and thus play the role of peace-maker. This includes focusing on the denuclearization of North Korea's nuclear program, the neutralization of the North Korean nuclear program, and achieves unification as alliance strategic goal. From the regional perspective, it is to mutually defend the US from the North's threat and build a regional security regime in order to conduct humanitarian assistance and disaster relief operations, as well as enhance cyber security. From global perspective, the job is to conduct UN-initiated peace keeping operations, multinational operations initiated by the US, and conduct maritime security as a key global partnership.

#### **5.4. US Perception Related to OPCON Transition and Strategic Communication**

There are two US perceptions related to the OPCON transition [34]. Conservatives expected the Moon Jae-in administration to follow the trend of OPCON initiated previously by the Roh Moo-hyun administration. However, the conditions-based transition of wartime OPCON through the sequential postponement was agreed between the previous ROK-US administrations. US security experts were also reluctant to see any fundamental change of the ROK-US combined systems considering the volatility of the surrounding environment on the peninsula, including the rapid rise of China [35].

In the meantime, considering the ROK national power, the progressive elements have perceived the OPCON transition as overdue. They do not worry that the conventional combat power of the ROK forces is superior to that of the North Korea forces. They also hold that the nuclear and missile threats should be managed by a combined posture. Considering the role of US forces in Korea in terms of strategic flexibility, the ROK should take the lead in the combined defense systems.

Considering the public worry and US conservatives' perception related to the OPCON transition, it is essential for the Ministry of National Defense and the ROK government to expand both the public support and empathy through strategic communication and implement roadmap for the wartime operational control transition.

## **6. Conclusion**

Lessons from the Korean War are meaningful. If the ROK did not take the lead in waging war and could not exercise operational control over its forces, we can assume that there would have been conflict between the ROK government's war objective and the UNC's war objective. The ROK government pursued an independent, liberal democratic unified Korea by seizing the Yalu and Tumen Rivers as its consistent war objective. However, the UNC pursued inconsistent war objectives, such as the recovery of the 38th parallel, the establishment of a liberal unified government, honorable withdrawal, and the end of the Korean War by truce. Second, there was another conflict

that arose: the crossing of the 38th parallel. The ROK government insisted that friendly forces maintained the momentum of the attack of the successful Incheon landing operations and recapturing Seoul and the 38th parallel was useless because the NKPA had already trampled the border and invaded the South. Without the UN Security Council's permission, the UNC insisted that friendly forces could not cross the parallel or China and Soviet Union might then get involved in the war. Third, the UNC's jurisdiction authority over North Korea and the ROK government's self-determination over the Korean nation was controversial. Ultimately, the ROK government protested the truce talks which would permanently fix the division of the peninsula. President Rhee attempted the withdrawal of operational control from the UNC and tried to conduct independent counter-offensive operations. The UNC did not allow the ROK to conduct its independent operations.

The Koreanization of the ROK defense is natural. This will take place through the complete transition of operational control along with the great growth of the ROK's national power, as well as the evolution of the ROK-US alliance. A heavy security reliance on the US is not normal for state, particularly considering the overwhelming national power superiority, enhanced international status, national self-respect, democratic sense of its citizens as demonstrated by the candle revolution, and the first-class ROK forces.

The transition of wartime operational control can be achieved by the ROK national will, strategy and capabilities. The trinity of the Korean people, government, and military as well as their determination will enable the ROK forces to be born again.

The transition of OPCON is a paramount national task since Korea has not defended itself since the enforcement of the Korean forces deactivation by Japanese imperialism on Aug 1, 1907. The moment the OPCON transition comes into being as of Jan 1 2021 as planned, the Republic of Korea will stand up to cope with North Korea's nuclear and missile programs, support a peace regime by force, in contingency, win war and achieve an independent, liberal democratic unified Korea.

The Republic of Korea will eventually become a normal state along with the transfer of operational control. North Korea, as well as other key actor states in the region, will perceive the ROK as a country that has brilliantly demonstrated its economic, political and cultural power.

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## Biography



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