



TAKING BACK CONTROL: SOUTH KOREA AND THE POLITICS OF OPCON TRANSFER

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- 1. The Moon government aims to achieve OPCON transfer (wartime control of its armed forces) by 2022, in accordance with a transition plan agreed upon with the United States.*
- 2. Proponents argue that the transfer is necessary to shed South Korea's image as a junior military partner to the United States and to increase its leverage with North Korea. Detractors see it as a potential death-knell to the future of the ROK-U.S. alliance.*
- 3. There are a number of roadblocks for the OPCON transfer to take place on time, not least domestic politics and the uncertain security environment.*

Introduction

If war broke out on the Korean Peninsula, under current ROK-U.S. alliance arrangements, the South Korean president would request a U.S. general to lead the war effort and assume operational control of the South Korean Armed Forces. Without any counterpart in the developed world, the ROK Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff only leads the armed forces during peacetime. This is set to change, however. Over a decade in the making, renewed efforts are underway to return wartime operational control to South Korea.

The transfer is a highly divisive issue in South Korean politics. Some call it a deathblow to the ROK-U.S. alliance. Others call it a prerequisite to achieve full sovereignty and credibly counter the North Korean threat. It is an issue of major significance not just to South Korea, but also for North-South relations and the ROK-U.S. alliance.

The Moon administration hopes to complete the transfer before the next presidential elections in 2022, but there are several potential

roadblocks on the horizon. This issue brief will focus on the domestic and inter-Korean dynamics of the operational control transfer (henceforth OPCON), exploring the transfer's implications and the possible obstacles ahead.

Background

In 1950, at the onset of the Korean War, South Korean President Syngman Rhee transferred operational control of all ROK forces to the United States. Operational control refers to the “authority to perform functions of command over subordinate forces.”¹ After the war, this institutional arrangement was formalized through a treaty with the underlying logic that South Korea still couldn't properly defend itself against the North. However, it also served the dual purpose of reassuring U.S. policymakers that their ally would be unable to drag them into a conflict against their will.²

Following the fall of the Soviet Union, there were several significant changes in the broader security environment. The changes prompted Presidents



Bill Clinton and Kim Young-sam to return peacetime OPCON to South Korea in 1994, by then an increasingly wealthy country. Henceforth, a South Korean general would command the ROK armed forces unless war erupted. During wartime, the armed forces would instead follow the orders of the American commander of the Combined Forces Command (CFC), which has a South Korean deputy commander. It took over a decade before President Roh Moo-hyun, in 2007, agreed with President George Bush on an initial timetable aiming for the completion of the transfer of wartime control by April 2012.³

Following a wave of anti-American sentiment in the early 2000s, the progressive Roh administration framed the OPCON transfer as a sovereignty issue and a Cold War anachronism. Notably, apart from South Korea, only fragile states like Afghanistan and Iraq have entirely put their forces under foreign command in modern times. South Korea, meanwhile, ranks among the world's most robust economies and militaries. Roh's supporters further believed that decreased dependence on the U.S., thus shedding the image in Pyongyang of Seoul as Washington's junior partner, would facilitate North-South rapprochement.

The subsequent conservative president, Lee Myung-bak, postponed the OPCON transfer to 2015, citing budget limitations and security concerns following the *Cheonan* incident with North Korea in 2010.⁴ On similar grounds, Lee's successor Park Geun-hye requested yet another postponement in the aftermath of Pyongyang's third nuclear test in 2013.⁵ During the ensuing talks, Presidents Park and Obama decided to delay the transfer indefinitely, and in parallel, they adopted a Conditions-based OPCON transition plan (COTP).

The transition plan specifies that the parties will determine an appropriate transfer date once "critical ROK and Alliance military capabilities are secured and the security environment [...] is conducive to a stable OPCON transition."⁶ Without the acquisition of these critical capabilities, the ROK military leadership would be unable to utilize and coordinate

ROK-U.S. alliance systems effectively. Nevertheless, President Park made no notable efforts to acquire these capabilities during her remaining time in office.

The Five Critical Capabilities required by the OPCON transition plan:⁷

- *Intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR)*
- *Command, control, communication, computers, and intelligence (C4I)*
- *Ballistic missile defense (modernized missile defense)*
- *Countering WMD (warning, protection, decontamination capabilities)*
- *Critical munitions (increased munition stockpiles)*

In the weeks following President Donald Trump's threats to unleash "fire and fury" on North Korea following its nuclear and missile tests in 2017, President Moon Jae-in – a former top aide of President Roh – announced his new policy to expedite the OPCON transfer. The OPCON transfer, along with a bolstered ROK military, would deter North Korean aggression and make South Korea into a Northeast Asian security hub, Moon argued.⁸ Thus, South Korea could become a security provider, helping to stabilize the wider region.

As tensions were running high between Washington and Pyongyang, Moon strongly underlined that war was an unacceptable outcome for South Korea.⁹ When outlining the administration's new peace initiative, he also stressed that South Korea "must sit in the driver's seat and lead Korean Peninsula-related issues."¹⁰ The timing ostensibly implied that Moon wanted to distance himself from Trump's war rhetoric, and through the transfer, make South Korea a more central counterpart in negotiations with the North.

The Moon administration has since initiated "Defense Reform 2.0," aiming to reach the COTP-criteria by 2022. As part of these efforts, Moon



has expanded the defense budget with an average annual increase of 7.5 percent, compared to 4-6 percent under the two previous administrations.¹¹ Simultaneously consolidating national defense capabilities while pursuing efforts towards peaceful engagement and the assuagement of tensions with North Korea are both central pillars of the Moon administration's National Security Strategy.¹²

The U.S. and ROK hold their annual talks on the OPCON transfer's progression behind-closed-doors, and the accompanying communiqués contain limited detail. Hence, it is not possible to tell exactly how far the capability build-up has come. Nevertheless, the two are indisputably making continuous progress.

In March 2019, a Special Permanent Military Committee was established to evaluate the transfer's monthly progression.¹³ In August, the U.S. and ROK carried out the first Combined Command Post Training to test the ROK's Initial Operational Capability.¹⁴ The following month, Seoul hosted discussions on the future role of the United Nations Command (UNC),¹⁵ and in parallel, a working group reviewed the OPCON progress during the 16th Korea-U.S. Integrated Defense Dialogue.¹⁶ Most recently, in mid-November, at the 51st Security Committee Meeting (SCM), the two sides affirmed that they had made progress in meeting the COTP-criteria.¹⁷

Implications of the OPCON Transfer

The overarching implications are gradually becoming more apparent as the OPCON preparations progress under the current evolving security environment.

The first implication is that the transfer has the potential to boost Seoul's position vis-à-vis both Pyongyang and Washington. Ever since the breakdown of U.S.-DPRK negotiations in Hanoi in February 2019, Pyongyang has snubbed Seoul, regularly turning down invitations for talks. Without the U.S. onboard, there is not much Seoul can bring to the negotiation table. Inter-Korean economic projects and sanctions relief are highly contingent on the approval of the UN

Security Council, and only the U.S. can provide any credible security guarantees. Hence, Pyongyang has little reason to reevaluate its longstanding view of the U.S. as its main counterpart in negotiations.

The return of OPCON and the related military buildup can, over time, challenge this perception by increasingly putting Seoul back in the driver's seat. As growing conventional capabilities raise threat levels against the North, the buildup also opens for future talks on bilateral arms reductions, giving Seoul leverage in negotiations. These developments would decrease the risk that Seoul continues to get sidelined in peace talks.

In the short term, however, Seoul is in somewhat of a catch-22. While Pyongyang has been highly critical of previous transfer delays,¹⁸ it is also strongly opposed to the current military buildup.¹⁹ Pointing to the ROK's rearmament and the OPCON-related military drills, Pyongyang has lashed out at President Moon's peace initiatives, describing his approach as two-faced.²⁰ Therefore, as long as the buildup is still ongoing, it is unlikely that inter-Korean relations will improve in the absence of progress in U.S.-DPRK relations.

The second implication relates to the changing escalation dynamics on the Korean Peninsula. In what has been called a "historical irony," the OPCON transfer could signify a role reversal with the U.S. vis-à-vis North Korea.²¹ While the U.S. initially took over OPCON in part to prevent the risk of Seoul invading the North without Washington's consent, the transfer reduces – but does not eliminate – the chance that a future U.S. administration could move militarily against North Korea without Seoul's backing.

However, this cuts both ways. When responding to North Korean provocations, the U.S. commander in South Korea has always been bound by the UNC's principle of proportionality.²² There are fewer such institutional restraints that apply directly to the South Korean military leadership,²³ and this has been a source of concern for U.S. officials. One does not have to go back very far to find concurrent examples of confrontational rhetoric from both Koreas.²⁴



It is thus not inconceivable that a more hawkish government in Seoul, having assumed full operational control, could more easily stoke the fire with Pyongyang in case of a diplomatic or military incident. Nonetheless, statements from U.S. officials indicate that the classified ROK-U.S. Combined Counter-Provocation Plan (CCP) already contains caveats on the ROK's use of American assets.²⁵ Thus, even after the OPCON transfer, alliance arrangements through the CCP can have a restraining influence.

Thirdly, the transfer entails a reconfiguration of the ROK-U.S. alliance. It is becoming increasingly clear, however, that this change in many ways will likely be mostly symbolic. At the 50th SCM in 2018, the two parties agreed to maintain the current structure of the alliance's Combined Forces Command. The main change is that the U.S. general assumes a supporting role to the South Korean commander and that the alliance headquarters will move away from Seoul.²⁶ Both sides have since repeatedly reaffirmed that U.S. troop withdrawals are not on the table.²⁷ The U.S. has also reiterated its continued commitment to providing extended deterrence to the ROK, using its full range of capabilities.²⁸

These assurances have alleviated some concerns that the transfer would entail a less integrated dual alliance structure whereby U.S. and ROK forces would serve under different commanders. Opponents of the OPCON transfer have long worried that such a division could facilitate a future fracture of the alliance and a U.S. withdrawal.²⁹ However, the abandonment anxiety persists even after the repeated reassurances. This anxiety suggests that it is not the transfer itself that is the cause of concern, but rather what it can imply: namely, a South Korea that is strong enough to manage its defenses independently. These concerns reflect a fear that the OPCON efforts will make it easier for Washington to one day sever ties with Seoul or vice versa.

In fact, the OPCON transfer is intertwined with the trajectory of the ROK-U.S. alliance as a whole. Washington's position on Seoul's dispute with Japan, the Trump administration's dramatic

hiking of military cost-sharing demands, and differing policy approaches to North Korea have all increased frictions in the alliance, raising increasing question marks over its future. The credibility of Washington's alliance assurances is also at stake: recently, in December, Trump even expressed doubts over whether American troop presence in Korea was in the U.S. national interest.³⁰

Despite such developments, unlike in the 2000s, there is strong public support for the ROK-U.S. alliance in South Korea.³¹ In both South Korea and the U.S., there is also strong support for the U.S. troop presence on the Peninsula.³² Moreover, the U.S. Congress has recently reaffirmed its long-term national interests in Northeast Asia and has made bipartisan efforts to put restraints on the executive's powers. The Asia Reassurance Initiative Act imposes stricter Congressional supervision of the President's actions in the Indo-Pacific and reiterates U.S. support for maintaining regional alliances. Additionally, the National Defense Authorization Act of 2020 limits funding for troop withdrawals.³³ Thus, while the current president remains a wild card in the equation, long-term ROK and U.S. interests do not appear to have changed considerably.

Roadblocks

That OPCON will be completed is not a given. Several significant roadblocks can impede or completely stop the transfer's progress in the coming years. The first three relate to the prospects of reaching the COTP-criteria before the end of Moon's term in 2022, whereas the fourth concerns the outcome of the upcoming South Korean presidential election.

First, a significant part of the OPCON efforts involves continuously evaluating the ROK military's interoperational capability with U.S. forces through joint military drills. Throughout the last two years, the U.S. and ROK have canceled, scaled-down, or postponed five major joint exercises to facilitate negotiations with Pyongyang. Most recently, in November, the annual Vigilant Ace air drills were initially scaled down and then adjourned.³⁴ If



this trend continues in 2020, OPCON-related drills can potentially be impacted negatively.

Another obstacle is the diverging opinions on the future role of the United Nations Command. Whereas the U.S. has pushed for the UNC to continue to play a central role in crisis management on the Peninsula, many South Koreans perceive the move with suspicion. Some worry that this will result in a watered-down transfer, whereby the U.S. largely retains control.³⁵ This issue must be settled before the transfer can be completed.

Furthermore, the current administrations in the U.S. and ROK have not clearly defined what security environment they consider “conducive to a stable OPCON transition.” It remains unclear under exactly what circumstances either party would support the final transfer, and additionally, whether a deteriorating security situation would strengthen their resolve or instead put the transfer on ice. Still, given the current security situation on the Peninsula, Seoul’s opinion is likely to hold the most weight. Should the Blue House adamantly request the full and final transfer once all necessary steps have been taken, it would be rather difficult for Washington to reject this flatly. Nonetheless, if Washington, for some reason, wants to stall the transfer, it can try to claim that the necessary conditions have not been fully met. All upcoming general security developments will undoubtedly play a significant role in how the two approach these issues.

Finally, changes in South Korean public opinion and the upcoming elections can have broad implications for the transfer’s prospects. Because backing is the strongest among the younger, more progressive generations, there is a gradual demographic shift in the transfer’s favor.³⁶ However, public support is still mixed. Currently, the support is split 50-50, mainly along partisan lines: 40 percent are in favor of the transfer, while 32 and 11 percent desire another postponement or outright termination, respectively. Consequently, the transfer constitutes a battleground in the broader – often polarized – debate over South Korea’s policy vis-a-vis North Korea.³⁷

The main opposition party, the Liberty Korea Party (LKP), has referred to the OPCON transfer as the inevitable disbandment of the ROK-U.S. alliance,³⁸ and in late October, the LKP leader Na Kyoung-won called for an indefinite delay of the transfer, stating that North Korean denuclearization must come first.³⁹ A month earlier, a group of former ROK generals voiced similar concerns, arguing that any changes to the combined military preparedness while the North Korean nuclear threat remains could cause a security crisis.⁴⁰ If returned to power, the LKP would thus likely delay the transfer even if the Moon administration manages to reach the COTP-criteria just before the elections in 2022.

Conclusion

In the last two years, the U.S. and ROK have taken several noteworthy steps to expedite the OPCON transfer. However, several roadblocks can be outlined on the horizon: continued postponement of military drills, disagreements over unresolved OPCON issues, and a conservative takeover of the Blue House.

If these barriers are overcome before 2022, the final transfer will spell out several important implications for inter-Korean relations and the ROK-U.S. alliance. In line with Moon’s ambitions, the transfer could increase Seoul’s long-term leverage over the North, forcing Pyongyang to accept it as a more central counterpart in negotiations. It could, however, also potentially undermine arguments for the need to maintain the ROK-U.S. alliance in its current form.

Despite fears and uncertainties regarding the optimal timing and conditions for the OPCON transfer to take place, it is worth contemplating if there will ever be a perfect time. The current strains in the ROK-U.S. alliance are ostensibly independent of the OPCON issue itself. Sooner or later, South Korea will need to find a way forward and leave the Cold War structures behind it and assume greater control of its destiny.



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