



CENTER FOR U.S.-KOREA POLICY

A PROJECT OF THE ASIA FOUNDATION

MARCH 2010 - VOL. 2, NO. 3

THE U.S. AND SOUTH KOREA: CHALLENGES AND REMEDIES FOR WARTIME OPERATIONAL CONTROL

BRUCE E. BECHTOL JR.

According to an agreement signed by U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates and South Korean Defense Minister Kim Jang-soo in 2007, the United States and the Republic of Korea have formally agreed that Combined Forces Command (CFC) will be dissolved by April 17th of 2012. Some political scientists—largely individuals without military experience in the United States, and certainly many academics and politicians on the left in South Korea—have hailed the move as "necessary" and useful. In addition, most of these same individuals have repeatedly simplified these complicated issues by asserting it will simply be a matter of the ROK military buying a lot of equipment and the U.S. maintaining its status as an ally, albeit in more of a supportive role. The official position of the United States government supports this assertion.

The majority of conservatives in South Korea do not support this position and have very real concerns about national security issues directly related to the planned dissolution of CFC. Meanwhile, most Americans do not understand even the basic infrastructure of CFC, nor are they aware of the complications associated with its disestablishment. In recent months in Korea, many respected scholars, politicians, and retired military officers have voiced concerns associated with this complete and unprecedented change in command relationships. But before addressing what South Korea's military needs to do if it is to assume a separate wartime command structure by 2012, one must first address the threat that the South will face from North Korea.

The threat from North Korea's military has not subsided, despite the overwhelming resource constraints Pyongyang has faced since the early 1990s (a better term to use when addressing what has occurred in North Korea's military forces would be "evolved"). In fact, as North Korea's capability to mount a large invasion built around armor and mechanized forces and supported by aircraft declined during the 1990s due to losses in fuel and foodstuffs that simply could not be replaced, Kim Jong-il focused his efforts on the build-up of asymmetric forces. These forces include short-range ballistic missiles (SRBMs) that now number at least 600 Scuds, and other shorter, more accurate missiles (such as the North Korean version of the old Soviet SS-21), long-range artillery, much of which was moved close to the demilitarized zone (DMZ) during the late 1990s, and special operations forces (now estimated to number up to 180,000 men by the ROK Ministry of National Defense) that can create havoc in the South using unconventional warfare. North Korea continues to extensively develop and enhance these capabilities. Most recently, unusual live-fire exercises were conducted on the west coast (north of Pyongyang) utilizing some of the exact long-range artillery systems that would be used to target Seoul in time of war.

By focusing resources on asymmetric forces, North Korea has maintained its capability to threaten the South, and has also continued to maintain its belligerent and uncooperative foreign policy—a policy that shows no signs of changing. It is this

asymmetric threat to the South that the U.S. government currently seems to underestimate when addressing the needed capabilities of its military ally, South Korea. The U.S. Director of National Intelligence Congressional testimony from February 3, 2010, clearly demonstrates just how much the North Korean non-nuclear threat is being downplayed. What makes the North's non-nuclear forces even more ominous is the fact that once they have created confusion and casualties potentially in the hundreds of thousands (many of them civilians) in the early hours and days of a potential war, this confusion could lead to weaknesses in South Korean defenses that could be exploited by North Korea's less capable but still extremely large and potentially dangerous maneuver forces such as mechanized infantry and armor. North Korea's maneuver forces have undergone reorganization and disposition changes since 2006 that have enhanced their capability to threaten the South.

It is because of this evolved North Korean threat that the ROK military faces challenges they will unlikely overcome by 2012. South Korea will not have the needed command, control, communications, computers, and intelligence (C4I) systems online and operational by 2012 in terms of acquisition, training, or even probable integration with U.S. systems. The same applies when it comes to airpower. The ROK Air Force continues to focus on improving its attack and air-to-air interdiction capability but must radically upgrade the airlift capability of elite airborne units if it is to truly take the fight to the North in any potential conflict. Finally, the ROK government simply does not have the ballistic missile defense capability to protect its military bases and population centers. The missiles Pyongyang holds in its growing arsenal can presently do damage to important nodes in the ROK that 15 years ago would have been more threatened by North Korea's now declined but still dangerous conventional maneuver forces capability. While realistic (though costly) steps can be taken to answer this threat, it will be nearly impossible to complete them within the next five years.

It is extremely important to note that while the South Korean military is highly capable of combating a traditional conventional forces threat from North Korea, it is still heavily dependent on the capabilities of the U.S. military to deter and defeat the highly evolved North Korean asymmetric threat. The North Korean military threat of 2010 is not the same as that of 1990 against which South Korea has been so well prepared to defend. While high-ranking American officials have stated that the U.S. can support its ally with "bridging capabilities," in reality, the best bridging capability would be to continue the command relationship that has proven to successfully deter the DPRK for so many years. By postponing the change in Wartime Operational Control (OpCon) until the ROK military has sufficiently achieved the necessary acquisition, training, personnel upgrades and transformation, the United States would be safeguarding the security and stability of its most loyal ally in East Asia.

Bruce E. Bechtol Jr. is Professor of International Relations at Marine Corps Command and Staff College. Dr. Bechtol will serve as a roundtable presenter at a symposium on OpCon Transfer and Its Implications for the U.S.-ROK Alliance, co-hosted by The Asia Foundation's Center for U.S. Korea-Policy and The Maureen & Mike Mansfield Foundation on March 25, 2010, in Washington DC.

The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Marine Corps Command and Staff College, the Marine Corps University, or the United States Government.

NEWS & EVENTS

MARCH 25, 2010 – CENTER FOR U.S.-KOREA POLICY AND MAUREEN & MIKE MANSFIELD FOUNDATION
OPCON TRANSFER AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR THE U.S.-ROK ALLIANCE

9:30am–2pm, Willard Room (Lobby Level), Willard Intercontinental, 1401 Pennsylvania Ave, Washington DC

The Center for U.S.-Korea Policy and the Maureen & Mike Mansfield Foundation will co-host a public symposium on issues surrounding the planned transfer of operational control (OPCON) in 2012 and implications for the U.S.-South Korea alliance. Panel presenters will include Bruce Bechtol, U.S. Marine Corps Command and Staff College; Michael O'Hanlon, The Brookings Institution; and Kim Sung-han, Korea University. Rep. Hwang Jin Ha, ROK National Assemblyman, will serve as a keynote speaker. Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense, Asian & Pacific Security Affairs, Derek Mitchell, will provide a luncheon address, and Gen. John H. Tilelli Jr., former Commander-in-Chief, UN Command, Combined Forces Command, U.S. Forces Korea, will provide introductory remarks. This conference is co-sponsored by Samsung, Poongsan Corporation, the Federation of Korean Industries (FKI), and JoongAng Ilbo. **To RSVP please contact jcho@asiafound-dc.org with name and affiliation.**

MARCH 25-28, 2010 – ASSOCIATION OF ASIAN STUDIES
NORTH KOREA AS A CHALLENGE TO SECURITY AND STABILITY IN NORTHEAST ASIA

10:45am-12:45pm, Philadelphia Marriott Downtown, Grand Ballroom Salon B, Philadelphia, PA

As part of the Association of Asian Studies (AAS) Annual Meeting 2010 (March 25-28), The Korea Society will lead a roundtable on North Korea and regional security, chaired by Evans Revere, President of The Korea Society. Scott Snyder, Center for U.S.-Korea Policy; Jack Pritchard, Korea Economic Institute; and L. Gordon Flake, the Maureen & Mike Mansfield Foundation, will serve as discussants. **Event details are available at: <http://www.aasianst.org/annual-meeting/index.htm>.**

APRIL 8-9, 2010 – CENTER FOR STRATEGIC AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

INTEGRATION OF THE KOREAN PENINSULA: FRAMEWORK FOR A POSITIVE FUTURE

Grand Intercontinental Hotel, Seoul, Korea

The Center for Strategic and International Studies, Hansun Foundation, and Chosun Ilbo are co-hosting a conference in Seoul on the integration of the Korean peninsula and regional implications. Scott Snyder, Center for U.S.-Korea Policy Director, will participate in a panel discussion.

PUBLICATIONS

Scott Snyder (February 16, 2010), “KORUS FTA: A Strategic Opportunity for Bipartisanship,” *Asia Unbound*, Council on Foreign Relations.

Jae-min Ahn (January 20, 2010), “U.S.-ROK Partnership for Nuclear Energy Cooperation (Industrial Perspective),” Paper presented at a U.S.-ROK Workshop on Nuclear Energy and Nonproliferation, Center for U.S.-Korea Policy, The Stimson Center, and Korea Atomic Energy Research Institute.

Bong-geun Jun (January 20, 2010), “U.S.-ROK Nuclear Energy Cooperation from Tutelage to Partnership: Nonproliferation Factor,” Paper presented at a U.S.-ROK Workshop on Nuclear Energy and Nonproliferation, Center for U.S.-Korea Policy, The Stimson Center, and Korea Atomic Energy Research Institute.

Chen Kane (January 20, 2010), “Nonproliferation Issues in U.S.-ROK Nuclear Cooperation,” Paper presented at a U.S.-ROK Workshop on Nuclear Energy and Nonproliferation, Center for U.S.-Korea Policy, The Stimson Center, and Korea Atomic Energy Research Institute.

Chang-Sun Kang (January 20, 2010), “U.S.-ROK Cooperation on Nuclear Energy and Nonproliferation,” Opening remarks at a U.S.-ROK Workshop on Nuclear Energy and Nonproliferation, Center for U.S.-Korea Policy, The Stimson Center, and Korea Atomic Energy Research Institute.

Hee-Seog Kwon (January 20, 2010), “The Role of ROK in the Context of Global Nonproliferation Efforts and the Bilateral Nuclear Nonproliferation Cooperation Issues,” Paper presented at a U.S.-ROK Workshop on Nuclear Energy and Nonproliferation, Center for U.S.-Korea Policy, The Stimson Center, and Korea Atomic Energy Research Institute.

Keun-bae Oh (January 2010), “U.S.-ROK Nuclear Energy Cooperation (Industrial Perspective),” Talking points presented at a U.S.-ROK Workshop on Nuclear Energy and Nonproliferation, Center for U.S.-Korea Policy, The Stimson Center, and Korea Atomic Energy Research Institute.

Kee-chan Song, “How to Untie the Gordian Knot? The Peaceful and Innovative Approach for the Universal Solution over Spent Fuel Management,” Paper presented at a U.S.-ROK Workshop on Nuclear Energy and Nonproliferation, Center for U.S.-Korea Policy, The Stimson Center, and Korea Atomic Energy Research Institute.

For a complete list of publications, please visit:
www.centerforuskoreapolicy.org.

VIEWS ON THE U.S.-ROK ALLIANCE

“Our bilateral relationship is strong and durable, and we are so appreciative of the leadership shown by Korea on a range of important matters, both regional and global.”

--**Hillary Clinton**, U.S. Secretary of State, Remarks with ROK Foreign Minister Yu Myung-hwan, February 26, 2010, Washington DC.

“I also hope that the U.S.-led defense scheme will remain further, given the North Korean nuclear and missile threat...But the OPCON transfer is a promise between the governments, so if we ask to scrap the agreement, we must give away many things.”

--**Kim Tae-young**, ROK Minister of National Defense, lecture hosted by a naval defense research institute, February 24, 2010, Seoul.

“At a fundamental level, U.S.-South Korea relations have never been better...the level of trust and confidence between our two leaders and our two governments is extraordinarily impressive.”

--**Kurt M. Campbell**, U.S. Assistant Secretary of State, Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, Remarks at the ROK Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, February 3, 2010, Seoul.

“The KORUS FTA represents an unprecedented opportunity to open the Korean market for American workers, farmers, and businesses. It is clear that implementation of the KORUS FTA would create significant economic opportunities for U.S. businesses.”

--**Han Duck-soo**, ROK Ambassador to the United States, Address to the American Chamber of Commerce in Korea, February 17, 2010, Seoul.

“There is no country that is more committed to friendship on a whole range of fronts than South Korea. What is also true is that the European Union is about to sign a trade agreement with South Korea, which means right at the moment when they start opening up their markets, the Europeans might get in there before we do.”

--**President Barack Obama**, Remarks at GOP House Issues Conference, Baltimore, January 29, 2010.

Nonprofit Org.
U.S. Postage
PAID
San Francisco, CA
Permit No. 6041

The Asia Foundation
1779 Massachusetts Ave NW, Suite 815
Washington, DC 20036 USA

**CENTER FOR
U.S.-KOREA POLICY**



**CENTER FOR
U.S.-KOREA POLICY**

The Asia Foundation
1779 Massachusetts Ave NW, Suite 815
Washington, DC 20036 USA
TEL: (202) 588-9420
FAX: (202) 588-9409
info@centerforuskoreapolicy.org

Scott Snyder, *Director*
See-Won Byun, *Research Associate*
Jacqueline Cho, *Junior Associate*
Soo Bin Chang, *Intern*

For more information on Center activities
please visit:
www.centerforuskoreapolicy.org.

The Center for U.S.-Korea Policy aims to deepen and broaden the foundations for institutionalized cooperation between the United States and South Korea by promoting a comprehensive U.S.-ROK alliance partnership on emerging global, regional, and non-traditional security challenges. A project of The Asia Foundation, the Center is based in the Foundation's Washington DC office.

The Asia Foundation is a private, non-profit, non-governmental organization committed to the development of a peaceful, prosperous, just, and open Asia-Pacific region. Drawing on 50 years of experience in Asia, the Foundation collaborates with private and public partners to support leadership and institutional development, exchanges, and policy research.

The Center for U.S.-Korea Policy is based in the Washington DC office of The Asia Foundation with seed funding from the Smith Richardson Foundation. The Center accepts donations from the public and private sector for its programs and operations. Inquiries should be directed to Scott Snyder at ssnyder@centerforuskoreapolicy.org.

This newsletter is produced by the Center for U.S.-Korea Policy to provide updates and analysis on current policy issues related to the U.S.-ROK alliance partnership. All views expressed in this publication are those of the author(s).

To be added to the newsletter listserv, please contact info@centerforuskoreapolicy.org.