

“Should We Continue the Planned ROK-US OPCON Transfer?”

Symposium on OpCon Transfer and its
Implications for the U.S.-ROK Alliance

Center for U.S.-Korea Policy
and The Maureen and Mike Mansfield Foundation

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Keynote Address

by

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The year 2010 is a meaningful to both nations as it marks the 60th anniversary of the outbreak of the Korean War. Without US-led UN member states' assistance and sacrifice, the Republic of Korea would not be what it is today. The United States played a key role in rescuing the newly born democratic Republic of Korea on the brink of fading away in history due to a sudden invasion of the communist North Korea. The Korean people have never forgotten such a selfless commitment and sacrifice of the United States, and thus the Korean War will remain an unforgotten war in the minds and hearts of the Korean people. Along with Korean War veterans, their families and those who served for the peace and prosperity of the Korean Peninsula after the armistice also deserve our sincere appreciation.

Ever since the armistice of the Korean War in which we fought together, we have been working shoulder-to-shoulder as a blood alliance and so developed successfully an unprecedented bilateral alliance which continues to stand firm and strong over the past half century. The ROK-US alliance is currently transforming into a comprehensive alliance beyond its traditional military partnership, encompassing political, economic, social, and cultural relationships.

This successful development of the alliance is a monumental bilateral achievement built on robust and deep-rooted political trust. Now, the alliance is an indispensable pillar for achieving the common national interests of the two nations and furthermore making an even greater contribution to international peace and prosperity. In this respect, the ROK-US alliance is our pride and proud legacy, and what we have to sustain and develop for the future. During more than a half century, the two nations have made bold decisions and overcome challenging issues facing us. By the same token, we must explore what to address, develop, and take required steps for building a future-oriented global alliance. Based on a mutual understanding of this strategic requirement, leaders of the Republic of Korea and the United States announced Joint Vision in the summit meeting in June, 2009. Now, we are closely working for implementing this Joint Vision.

Recently, there are several challenging issues required for strategic and better solutions between the two nations. Issues such as the KORUS FTA, wartime operational control transfer (wartime OPCON transfer) are likely to have a significant impact on the strength and future shape of the ROK-US alliance. Among these issues, I believe that OPCON transfer, which was agreed in 2007, is the most critical issue that needs

immediate attention from the two nations. Comparing to other bilateral issues, OPCON transfer will influence the security environment of the Korean Peninsula and the entire Asian region as well. In addition, it will become a key variable which may change the course of developing global cooperation between the two nations.

I understand that the main purpose of holding today's symposium is to discuss this important issue. It is very regrettable that we could not have an opportunity to discuss the issue of the planned OPCON transfer so far in the United States, although there were many opportunities for public discussion in Korea. I must stress that we need to thoroughly examine the issues concerning ROK-US OPCON transfer today, and hope that our discussion will contribute to gathering momentum for promoting strategic understanding about OPCON transfer and to exploring solutions through consultations between the two governments.

Today, I would like to present what kind of problem is caused by implementing the planned OPCON transfer and explain why these are problematic. Then, I also express my opinions about what these problems imply and some of strategic tasks which the ROK and the United States should address. Furthermore, I recommend alternative solutions for resolving these tasks. I would like to make it clear to the audience that what I speak today is my own view and does not represent the views of the ROK government and the Grand National Party, unless otherwise indicated.

The security situation on the Korean peninsula is very flexible due to a continued increase of unpredictability and uncertainty. While North Korea continues to heighten its military threat, its domestic political, economic, and social situation have become so unstable that a sudden crisis could happen anytime in the North. Under these circumstances, we must be prepared for all possible situations and be ready to swiftly and actively respond to various threats when necessary. However, the ROK and the United States have agreed to dismantle the ROK-US Combined Forces Command (CFC), one of the most efficient combined command structures in the world, by April 17, 2012. While the two administrations respect the bilateral agreement and are not bringing up any issues about the dismantlement, there is an increasing concern among the public and these concerns are likely to continue to grow.

Under these circumstances, is it appropriate and intelligent to continue the transfer of ROK-US OPCON and dismantling the ROK-US CFC? Regrettably, I would like to say NO to this. If so, what are existing problems?

Three Critical Issues to Consider

There are three critical issues to consider. Continuing the implementation of the planned OPCON transfer has such issues as *1) it is going against the changes of security condition on the Korean Peninsula, 2) it would be likely to weaken the ROK-US combined deterrence capabilities and signaling a wrong message to North Korea, 3) the ongoing effort for OPCON transfer is excessively focused on meeting a target date of completing the transfer with considering military side only.*

“Going Against the Security Condition on the Korean Peninsula”

First, why are we going against the way in which the security condition on the Korean Peninsula evolves?

It is required to take into consideration all dimensions of North Korea such as politics, military, economy, and society in assessing its current threats which have direct impact on the security condition of the Korean Peninsula.

North Korea has endlessly escalated its military threats, now including unconventional threats beyond its traditional conventional threats. Despite continued sanctions and persuasion by the international community, North Korea does not seem to be willing to stop its nuclear and missile development programs. These menacing behaviors pose a grave threat to Northeast Asia and beyond, thus North Korea is no longer a regional threat only, but now an international one. In order to attain military and financial goals, the North has been closely working with state actors such as Iran and Myanmar, including non-state actors like international terrorist groups.

Recently, North Korea continues artillery firings in the West Sea after unilateral announcement of firing-zone. According to the 2010 Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) and Ballistic Missile Defense Review (BMDR) released by United States Department of Defense in early February, “if there are no major changes in North Korea’s national security strategy in the next decade, it will be able to mate a nuclear warhead to a proven delivery system.”

In addition to this escalation of military threats, domestic political instability in the North increases potential for a new kind of crisis such as a sudden collapse of the North Korean regime which might be triggered by unexpected domestic changes. Kim, Jong-

Il will never give up his military first policy as long as it serves the purpose of regime survival and power succession to his son. Ever since the rumor of Kim's poor health condition began to spread in late 2008, North Korea has made an enormous effort to promote its military first policy which particularly aims to strengthen internal political cohesiveness and mobilize the people for building a 'Great and Strong Nation' by the centennial anniversary of the birth of Kim Il-Sung in 2012. It seems to be certain that Kim Jong-Il's control of political power has become weak. A U.S. intelligence agency predicted that Chairman Kim would not be able to survive more than five years. While Assistant Secretary of State Kurt Campbell visited Seoul recently, he revealed on off-the-record, "based on collecting various medical diagnoses, Kim, Jong-Il has a life expectancy of about three years." These two predictions imply that Kim's life expectancy is at least three years, at most five years.

Needless to say, his death will bring about massive political disorder in the power system and also a power struggle among political factions. This political chaos would be likely to be abysmal particularly when the process of power succession does not go well. In other words, the occurrence of a sudden change in North Korea would bring an overall crisis to North Korea and its neighboring states as well. In North Korea, an entire political system would face unprecedented disorder and challenges. And, in the region, neighboring states would have strategic difficulties with managing their vulnerability to North Korea's sudden change, and thus they are stimulated to take attention-deficit actions. These phenomena would be likely to endanger peace and security in Northeast Asia.

It is almost impossible that North Korea would be able to overcome its ailing economy. Although North Korea implemented a currency revaluation in an attempt to curb staggering inflation rates and root out black market trading on November 30th, 2009 for the first time in 17 years, the result turned out to be an absolute failure. There is a rumor that Park, Nam-Ki, former Chief of Planning and Finance in the Korean Workers' Party (KWP) who was in charge of the recent currency revaluation, was executed. This failure clearly revealed that North Korea's economy is very unstable. In North Korea, a number of populations have died by starvation rampant across the nation over more than ten years and daily necessities including food could not be provided without outside assistance. Under these serious economic conditions, international sanctions imposed by UN Resolution 1718 and 1874 adopted for stopping North Korea's nuclear development program further deteriorates the economic situation.

Despite these present and massive North Korea's threats, the ROK and the United States are moving toward disbanding Combined Forces Command (CFC) which play a pivot role in case of crisis on the Korean Peninsula, and transferring OPCON which is a core of commanding structure buttressing combined defense capabilities. This process advances for meeting a target date of April 17th, 2012 for the planned OPCON transfer, and ignoring that North Korea has set 2012 as a target year to accomplish its objective of building a 'Great and Strong Nation.' It is doubtful that disbanding CFC and OPCON transfer going against the changes of security condition on the Korean Peninsula under which the two nations are required to strengthen their combined readiness than ever before.

“Weakening of Deterrence Capabilities and Sending a Wrong Message to North Korea”

Second, there is a strong concern that the planned OPCON transfer would be likely to weaken ROK-US combined deterrence capability and signaling a wrong message to North Korea.

The top strategic priority of the ROK-US alliance is to prevent a crisis and so maintaining peace and prosperity, and increase a mutual national interest. But, it is widely understood that OPCON transfer significantly weakens ROK-US combined deterrence capability. Needless to say, repelling an invasion of North Korea is a critical mission, but deterrence should be a more important strategic goal. The ROK military is capable of countering North Korea's conventional invasion, but it is still questionable how well it could respond to North Korea's diverse and unconventional military capability including weapons of mass destruction.

I would like to stress that it is imperative to unify ROK-US command structure for maintaining the strategic effectiveness of combined deterrence and warfighting capability under the condition that the ROK military alone is not able to secure deterrence capability against North Korea. It is a common understanding that dissolving a unity of combined command structure would be likely to weaken the readiness posture of U.S. forces in Korea. Accordingly, it is not the right time to discuss the disbandment of combined deterrence capability while the two nations are required to strengthen for North Korea's conventional military threats, and now including its unconventional and asymmetric threats posed by weapons of mass destruction. In addition, maintaining capable deterrence posture alleviates the Korean

people's concerns.

What signal does the planned OPCON transfer deliver to North Korea?

North Korea continues opposing the stationing of U.S. forces in Korea. To this end, North Korea has taken a wedge strategy between the ROK and the United States for instigating anti-Americanism in Korea by claiming that the ROK government's military sovereignty is lost to the United States. In order to strengthen this position, North Korea has stated its position that it is not willing to have military talks with the ROK which does not have military sovereignty. For these reasons, North Korea greatly welcome the decision of disbanding CFC and OPCON transition, and advertising these changes to North Korean people as the success of its efforts for restoring ROK military sovereignty. At the same time, it is certain that North Korea perceives that the ROK-US alliance becomes weak as a result of OPCON transfer. And, North Korea would be likely to harshly push its demand of changing armistice condition into peace treaty. These conditions provide favorable ground for North Korea to reach the complete withdrawal of U.S. forces from Korea, beyond the disbandment of CFC and OPCON transfer.

In addition to sending the wrong signal to North Korea, OPCON transfer would be likely to have a significant impact on U.S. pursuit of national interests in Northeast Asia. As the ROK-US alliance has been regarded as a strategic linchpin for achieving U.S. national interests in the region, regional states are likely to regard the ROK-US OPCON transfer as an indication of strategic weakness between the two nations.

Why do we push the planned OPCON transfer while sending a wrong signal to North Korea and regional states?

Should we disband CFC when responding to the escalation of North Korea's threats?

Are we now closing a fire station despite increasing possibility that North Korea may put a fire?

“Preoccupation with meeting the deadline”

Third, there is no major change in the two nations' position of completing OPCON transfer until April 17th, 2012.

Under this condition, I found a serious problem in assessing security conditions on the Korean Peninsula changing since the OPCON transfer agreement in 2007 and

accordingly developing strategic measures are sidelined by meeting the deadline. Because OPCON transfer is related to military and politics as well, this problem is more serious than we recognize. Particularly because the effect of OPCON transfer in the ROK, North Korea, and region is bigger than that in the United States, we had better to politically approach OPCON transfer which could not be handled by military measures.

Why do we need the review?

What are the reasons for reviewing the planned OPCON transfer by holding a common understanding about aforementioned problems concerning OPCON transfer?

“Wrong Agreement”

First, it is important to examine how the ROK and the United States agreed to OPCON transfer in 2007.

At the time, the two nations pursued their respective national interests based on their strategic misunderstandings, not on common objectives for the future, and thus moving toward an inappropriate agreement.

Ignoring the obvious fact that the Republic of Korea is a sovereign nation with international recognition, former President Roh, Moo-Hyun, during his presidential campaign, proposed that he would restore national sovereignty by retaking wartime OPCON from the United States if he was elected. Once he took his office in 2003, he immediately undertook negotiation on OPCON transfer between the two nations. At the time, the Roh administration believed that the ROK does not possess OPCON because a U.S. general holds the position of commander of CFC directed by presidents from both nations. President Roh appealed to the Korean people by politicizing the retaking of OPCON in a way that OPCON transfer is required for restoring national pride and normalization of the bilateral alliance.

If so, how did National Assembly and the Korean public view OPCON transfer? Those who were seriously concerned about the security of the Korean Peninsula understood that it was wrong to begin negotiation for OPCON transfer, and thus launched a “10 Million Signing Campaign for Opposing CFC Disbandment and OPCON Transfer before Complete Resolution of North Korea’s Nuclear Problem.” Now, approximately 9.8 million people have signed the petition, and it is expected that

the number will reach 10 million by June 25th marking the 60th anniversary of the Korean War. The Korean National Assembly actively joined this campaign. The resolution of opposing OPCON transfer before resolving North Korea's nuclear problem was adopted at Defense Committee of National Assembly in December 22nd, 2006. In addition, 142 out of 299 National Assembly members convened a parliamentarians' group and cosigned a letter opposing OPCON transfer. This letter was sent to both the Secretary of State and the Secretary of Defense.

The U.S. government was first surprised by the ROK government's strong request for opening negotiations about OPCON transfer. Also, the U.S. administration was concerned that linking national pride and OPCON transfer by the ROK government might cause anti-American movements in Korea like that the United States experienced after two middle-school girls' death by an U.S. military armored vehicle. For this reason, the Bush administration began negotiations with the ROK government by relating the transfer to its Global Posture Review (GPR) developed since 2002 and a new concept of Strategic Flexibility of U.S. forces abroad. In other words, the U.S. government concluded that the strategic flexibility of U.S. forces in Korea is seriously constrained because the Korean people strongly oppose the movement of U.S. troops in Korea outside the Korean Peninsula under a situation that CFC exists and its American four-star commander holds a wartime operational control.

Thus, the U.S. government accepted Korea's demand for transferring OPCON in a bid to increase the strategic flexibility of U.S. Forces in Korea. Namely, as the ROK government requested the transfer to pursue its own national interests, the United States took this opportunity to pursue its own strategic interests. In the process of making a decision about disbanding CFC and OPCON transition, the U.S. government was relatively free of domestic political burden because Americans believe that the station of U.S. forces in Korea would be enough to conduct its commitment to defend the Republic of Korea.

I must stress that the U.S. government held two critical misunderstandings when deciding OPCON transfer. The first misperception is that the ROK government unconditionally opposes a dispatch of U.S. forces into other parts of the world. The ROK and the United States reached a mutual agreement about the relocation of USFK into other regions when required by U.S. global demand with preparing a strategic alternative in advance. In some cases, the ROK government sent its military troops

instead of USFK. The other misperception is that maintaining U.S. troops in Korea is enough to fulfill the U.S. commitment to defend the Republic of Korea and emphasizing strategic flexibility of U.S. forces. It seems that this approach stimulates the Koreans' perception that the United States might change its strategic view of Korea as a forward base for its military operations, no longer complete commitment for defending Korea.

Despite opposition from the National Assembly and the Korean people, the former ROK administration kept its campaign promise. And, as the U.S. government agreed to the ROK's request, the two governments finalized negotiation about OPCON transfer. The ROK defense minister Kim, Jang-Soo and the U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates agreed to a future command structure at the 38th Security Consultative Meeting (SCM) in 2006, and then announced in February 2007 a plan of disbanding the CFC and transferring OPCON to the ROK by April of 2012.

In summary, I would like to point out that the two nations agreed upon OPCON transfer without basing the decision on common alliance objectives, but instead to pursue their own national interests based on their strategic misunderstandings. It was as if two trains bound for different final destinations met accidentally at an unscheduled station and then continued on to their original destinations.

“The Korean People’s Concerns”

Second, what impact does the planned OPCON transfer may have on the Korean public perception?

Most recent several public polls revealed that approximately ranging from 60% to 70% of respondents opposed OPCON transfer. The main reason for the opposition is that the Korean public is more concerned than ever before about the escalation of North Korea's military threats, including uncertain prospects for resolving North Korea's nuclear problem. In addition, increasing potential for the occurrence of a sudden change in North Korean regime attracts wide attention from the public. In contrary to this public trend, those who supported former President Roh and members of opposition party still hold to the planned OPCON transfer, but they are losing support from the public.

Furthermore, the Korean people have doubt that the planned OPCON transfer underestimates the concerns raised by the Korean public while North Korea continues

escalating its military and non-military threats without hesitation. Also, Koreans worry that the ROK government does not reflect their concerns in ongoing consultations with the U.S. government in the process of implementing the planned OPCON transfer because of U.S. strong stance on continuing the OPCON transfer without revision. In addition, the Korean people suggest that OPCON transfer is not a matter with U.S. Department of Defense only, but between the two governments.

“Unhelpful for the development of the ROK-US Alliance”

Third, what do we consider regarding the future development of the ROK-US alliance?

As already stated above, disbanding CFC and OPCON transfer might downplay the deployment of U.S. forces in Korea. The completion of OPCON transfer to the ROK government would ease the defense burden on the United States in defending the Korean Peninsula. But, I believe that OPCON transfer would impede the successful evolution of the ROK-US alliance into a global partnership. The reason is that the two nations would face strategic difficulties with advancing a common strategic goal of alliance transformation without securing security and peace on the Korean Peninsula. In other words, implementing OPCON transfer seems to widen the strategic gap between the two nations rather than strengthening our solidarity. While the ROK and the United States are working together to realize Joint Vision agreed at the summit talks in June, 2006, we must review the planned OPCON transfer.

Some pundits assert that revising the planned OPCON transfer is not appropriate because it sends the wrong signal to North Korea that the ROK-US alliance is adrift. However, I believe that we can handle this issue as we maintain a successfully matured alliance. Also, I can assure you that reviewing the planned OPCON transfer would greatly contribute to the development of the alliance because OPCON transfer is a matter of sustaining peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula. A message delivered to North Korea finally turns out to be positive to us because we are working for strengthening combined deterrence capability.

Current Status of the Planned OPCON Transfer

“The Request of Review is Sidelined for Respecting the Agreement”

The completion of OPCON transfer is approximately two years ahead of a target deadline. Under this condition, either the ROK or the United States does not request a

review of the planned OPCON transfer despite the escalation of threat to the Korean Peninsula. The main reason is that in principle both nations respect the agreement made by previous administrations. In addition, it seems that the Korean government feels reluctant and burdened to make any demand for change when the U.S. maintains a firm intention to implement OPCON transfer as planned.

“Respecting the Agreement, but Supplementing When Necessary”

The ROK Joint Chief of Staff (JCS) is in the process of drafting Strategic Directive No.3 in preparation for the transfer. At the level of combined military exercise, we evaluated ROK Initial Operational Capabilities (IOC) in 2009, planning to evaluate the U.S. Initial Operational Capabilities (IOC) in 2010 and both sides’ Full Operational Capabilities (FOC) in 2011. These evaluations are concentrated on assessing readiness posture and overall military capabilities against traditional threats posed by North Korea. Unfortunately, the evaluation lacks an examination of a combined capability to respond to new threats posed by North Korea such as nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles. What it make worse is that the two militaries are significantly unprepared for responding to a sudden change in North Korea. Accordingly, they overlook the importance of seamless coordination and cooperation between military and political efforts because a sudden change in North Korea would be erupted by military threats and other political, economic, and social causes as well. We must review the planned OPCON transfer when facing these diverse and expansive threats posed by North Korea.

In principle, we must respect the agreement. Unilateral calls for revising or discarding the agreement unless there is a consensus would seriously damage political trust between the two parties. However, increasing concerns about the planned OPCON transfer strengthen the necessity of reviewing OPCON transfer. When dealing with this issue, taking political initiative rather than military consultations is required for finding a better solution.

Recommendations for Addressing the Issues

“What to do?”

How do we approach to resolve the current issues concerning the planned OPCON transfer?

It is urgent for both sides to hold a common understanding about the issues I raised

above. Without addressing this strategic task, it would not be possible to review either military or political problems concerning the planned OPCON transfer. Resolving the issues requires leaders of the ROK and the United States to craft a political resolution and continue our strategic efforts in developing a future-oriented global ROK-US alliance.

To this end, I recommend that at the earliest possible time the ROK and the United States should begin establishing a ROK-US Joint Study Group to review the OPCON transfer issue in the context of Joint Vision issued by leaders of the two nations in June, 2009 for a future-oriented global ROK-US alliance, and thus seeking a better solution.

“Alternatives?”

What alternative to the planned OPCON transfer can we consider?

We first need to stop the progress of implementing the planned OPCON transfer. Then, it is necessary to explore what condition should be met for resuming a plan of transferring OPCON. I would like to suggest such conditions as; *1) complete resolution of North Korea’s nuclear problem, 2) removing uncertainty about potential for a sudden change in North Korea, 3) establishing a peace treaty based on confidence-building between the two Koreas.*

In addition, it is notable that Korean general takes the position of commander of CFC, U.S. troops assuming a supporting role from a leading role, rather than disbanding CFC and transferring OPCON. The other alternative is to transform UNC into playing a wartime operation command in addition to its current designate strategic role of supervising an armistice condition and international force provider for a crisis.

Removing Worries, and Let’s Go Together

Peace and stability of the Korean peninsula is the first priority of the ROK-US alliance. We are at a crucial historical stage of accomplishing these objectives and preparing our alliance for the constantly changing international security environment of the 21st Century. There are so many tasks ahead for the Republic of Korea and the United States to prepare the bilateral alliance to respond to the needs not only on the Korean peninsula but also in the global community.

We have a very finely structured alliance system which is capable of boldly and prudently resolving any challenges facing us. We must wisely overcome any concerns in this course of implementing the planned OPCON transfer.

We must throw out all our worries caused by the planned OPCON transfer, and let's go together for the future of peace and prosperity.